

LONDON DIVE SHOW EDITION

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FEBRUARY 2016

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8 WRECKS A WEEK

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when depth is no limit

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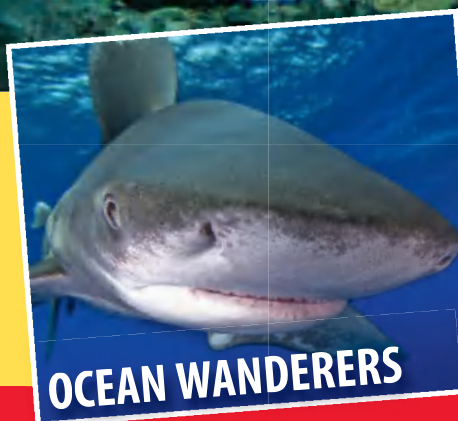
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STEVE WEINMAN, EDITOR

FIRST IN



HONEYMOON HELL-RAISERS

IT'S THE LONDON DIVE SHOW THIS MONTH, a prime objective of which is to encourage newcomers into the sport. What makes this difficult? Stories like the following – though I think we can all enjoy reading between the lines...

A Hollywood actor known mainly for getting hitched to megastar Jennifer Anniston last summer stared death in the face when he went diving on his honeymoon – or so he told TV audiences in a recent interview.

The idea of our Jen so nearly being widowed within days of her nuptials fuelled a semi-hysterical press frenzy, in which in no instance did I see the husband's loose use of the word "oxygen" corrected to "air".

Let's examine Justin Theroux's account of his near-death experience in Bora Bora, French Polynesia. Following a "little training course" to a depth of 3m, the 44-year-old actor was enthused enough to book a boat-dive with a male friend (part of the honeymoon entourage) the next day.

Only now he had a new instructor: "There's this kinda French guy called Gilles or something. There was no communicating – we could not talk."

The instructor must have spoken some American, however, because when Theroux told him that he'd dived only once before he replied: "Yes, but you are so sporting!" So the flattered student allowed himself to be fitted with a tank, although claiming that somebody had already used it before him.

He showed the interviewer his mastery of hand signals: "This is 'good' (gives an ascent sign), this is 'OK' (some sort of jazz-hands sign reminiscent of 'I feel dodgy'), this is 'not great' (out-of-air sign) and then 'go up' (repeats first sign).

"So we're going really deep and... I look at my thing and it's on red basically." He showed his contents gauge to the instructor, who seemed unimpressed and told him to keep finning. "So I'm trying to enjoy the manta rays but I'm distracted because I want some oxygen. And I look down and I think: Oh, my God, I'm really deep in the red, it's like... at one!

"So I go over and he gives me his respirator or whatever the thing's called and I'm like no, no, I just want to go up. I'm doing every hand signal I've ever been taught and he just keeps swimming away from me.

"So I swim over to my friend and say dude, look and he goes: 'Oh my God, you're about to die!' I go over again and the guy just grabs my respirator and hands me this emergency respirator [or "emergency oxygen mask"; as one freewheeling press version had it]. Why are we doing an emergency when Earth is up there? I can see it about 40ft [12m] up but I don't want to swim up to the top and get like the bends.

"So he pulls the respirator out, sticks it in my mouth, hits this clear button which sends all these bubbles out, sends water down my throat, and now I'm coughing and hacking under water, not a great feeling." Paranoia was setting in. "I'm thinking now this is some plot to kill me on my honeymoon.

"So now I'm linked to this jerk because I have to swim alongside him and finally we have to go up slowly, 5ft at a time, and I'm just looking at him, mask to mask, thinking: I'm gonna murder this guy! I'm just gonna throw the biggest haymaker! I get on the boat and was just like slamming everything down." That will have told him.

The story was twisted every which way in print and repeated enough to horrify legions of people who will now never go diving. I did try, but "Gilles" was unavailable for comment.

All we know is that Justin Theroux doesn't plan to dive again.

**'I'M TRYING TO ENJOY
THE MANTA RAYS ...
BUT I WANT SOME
OXYGEN!'**



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**RESPECT
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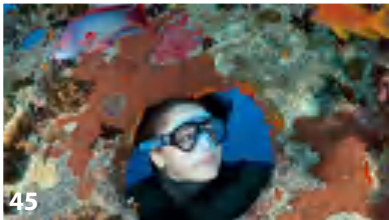
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Cover shot:
Diver in Light, by
Arthur Kingdon



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...Come in from the Cold

FULL LUNGS UNREALISTIC

Simon Pridmore's article *What To Do When It All Runs Out* (December 2015) was excellent, and a thought-provoker. I'd like to add to his comments about "Real-Life Drills".

We all start our out-of-air (OOA) skills including CESA with full lungs, but in reality this, just like kneeling on the bottom facing our "rescuer", is also unreal.

Imagine that you have a catastrophic regulator failure or run out of air when your lungs are full – the first time you'll notice it is after exhaling, so you'll actually have empty lungs.

In all probability you'll have an OOA situation with partly filled lungs, anything from empty (apart from residual volume) to almost full (a normal breath is less than maximum inspired capacity).

So to take Simon's phase 2 skills further, practise with only partly filled lungs for that added sense of urgency. Partly filled lungs mean that you have to use the purge button instead of the breath-out-blast method, and you'll have less time to execute the drill than with full lungs.

As Simon states, however, practise in controlled conditions and definitely not at great depth. With partly filled lungs you'll still have the primary regulator in your mouth until exchanging it, and if you fail to purge you won't have much time to recover your own primary. So I'd practise in the pool, just as Simon recommends.

Additionally, if your OOA buddy removes your primary reg, you too will probably have partly filled lungs.

Having had this happen to me, my habitual



resting position for my hands during dives is with them resting on my AAS. Perhaps that reflects a bit of paranoia, but my hands have to rest somewhere.

It's still better to not run out of air, however.

STEVE COPELAND, LIGHTWOOD, STAFFS

Simon Pridmore comments: Great feedback – Steve Copeland makes a good point regarding practising with partially filled lungs.

Clothing conundrum

In view of the ongoing challenges with air travel and divers, and also manufacturers striving to design equipment lighter and more compact to meet the usual 20kg restrictions on checked-in baggage, you might be interested in our story.

We decided to continue with our scheduled trip to Sharm el Sheikh, despite current travel advice. Six of our group were travelling from North Cyprus with Pegasus Airlines via Istanbul – these flights were not affected. Two who had been travelling from the UK with one of the airlines that had cancelled flights opted to change to Pegasus and unite with us for the onward journey to Sharm.

A few small delays and we arrived at Sharm and had a quiet but fabulous six days' diving.

The return journey was a little more stressful.

On arrival at the airport we noted that there was a delay on the flight of a little over an hour, though anyone travelling often tends to get used to this.

Security seemed fairly good, and we

duly queued to check our baggage in. The line was slow, and it became clear that for some reason some of those in front were not being checked in.

It came to our turn. Our baggage, eight pieces between us and all within the 20kg limit we were allowed to check in, was put on the conveyor scales.

We were asked if we had any dive equipment, I assumed that this question was security-related, given the prevailing situation, but on confirming that we did, we were told that there was a \$55 charge. We were also told that if we said no, our bags would be X-rayed again.

We, and probably most of the other passengers, were outraged. We initially thought that this was some sort of scam, designed to supplement wages or make up for the lack of business.

We argued, the controller sent an email to Pegasus, and some time later the reply came – which we saw – clearly stating that we were to be charged.

I noted that the original email referred to 15 passengers.

There were clearly more and this may account for the reluctance to issue receipts, which for some, but not all, were eventually forthcoming.

Back home I asked for clarification from Pegasus, and it reconfirmed this charge.

I have examined its website carefully and, according to this, checked baggage should consist of clothes. That's it. Anything other than clothes could come into one of its many categories – or even the "Special Equipment" category.

Other divers should be warned, because you could end up having to pay this charge both ways. Many from the UK go to Turkey and North Cyprus for diving, not only Sharm and Hurghada, and may end up worse off than if they had used a more diver-friendly airline.

I along with several from my group and many disgruntled divers who had travelled from Spain and France using this airline will think long and hard before travelling with Pegasus again.

JONATHAN HALL-SMITH, NORTH CYPRUS

Pegasus Airlines comments: Although our website currently stipulates that only clothes are allowed in our hold luggage, we launch a new website in January 2016 in which we will be changing this information and policy to inform our guests that the check-in luggage is not limited to just clothes.

However, as is routine with most low-cost airlines around the world, we classify diving equipment, along with other equipment for golf, surfing or skiing, under "Sporting Equipment", for which a fee is attached to its carriage. This information is published transparently on our website www.flypgs.com/en under "Fly with Pegasus/General Rules" and "Special Baggage & Equipment", where diving equipment is listed.

To make this information more transparent during the booking process itself, our new website will contain additional information for any other sports equipment not listed in the drop-down menu, explaining that guests will be able to pay the designated carriage fee for that equipment at the airport during check-in.

Thank you for your assistance in identifying this matter and for helping us to provide a better service for our guests.

Double standards

Recreational diving is facing a lot of challenges, including those flagged up in January's *The Big Question – Medical Porkies*. Yes, divers do tell porkies on self-assessments.

I'd like to highlight another aspect. The latest change in annual medical exams is set to highlight even more the risk difference between fitness levels required for professional dive instructors and for their club instructor counterparts.

Many older or less-fit pro instructors who fail the new test will effectively be stopped from instructing professionally – but this will not stop them instructing within a club structure.

This raises some major dilemmas:

- 1) Should people considering taking up diving have the right to know about these differences in fitness requirements before they decide which method of training to use to learn to dive?
- 2) Will dive-clubs bar professional instructors who have failed the obligatory HSE medical from instructing within a dive-club?





3) If they do this, will UK dive-clubs bring in similar fitness-testing for existing club instructors?

The differing systems of establishing fitness to dive (FTD) are mostly based on the honesty of recreational divers, however they learn, and club instructors. That the only official monitoring of fitness is restricted to the pros seems unfair.

Desire to promote the sport to a wider public has resulted in several changes to fitness requirements.

We no longer require chest X-rays at the outset; diabetics can dive subject to medical assessment, and there are plans to extend this to some types of asthma; and the old BMI limit has been scrapped for those who can pass the in-water fitness assessment.

This relies on divers being honest, and continuing to be honest during each self-certification.

If we want to make diving both more popular and safer, shouldn't we have a single simple system of establishing FTD that also provides a level playing-field for all instructors? And shouldn't there be some official fitness-monitoring process?

We insurers are also concerned about the two systems of certifying FTD, one used by UK clubs, the other by PADI and other professional associations.

If you are honest enough to disclose a relevant underlying condition under the PADI system, you take a form to your own GP that includes advice on how to assess you.

However, UK club divers have to be assessed by a Diving Medical Referee (a doctor who is a member of the UKDMC). We have many examples of the deficiency of the GP method in certifying divers as fit. UKDMC doctors are far better at providing good diving medical advice and sensible limitations on diving that makes it safe to engage in.

In some UK households we may be insuring a mix of BSAC and PADI divers (or instructors) with different methods of assessing their FTD!

This is a nonsense, and not a great advert for how UK diving is currently controlled.

I have raised this issue with the medics and clubs, but it seems that most are content to leave it as it is, because "it's always been that way"

BOB ARCHELL, MD, DIVE MASTER INSURANCE CONSULTANTS, LEIGH-ON-SEA, ESSEX

Got something diving-related you'd care to share? Email steve@divermag.co.uk, including your name and postal address – and please confirm that you're writing exclusively to **DIVER**

The only coral in sight

I spent two weeks in November not diving at the Sandals Emerald Bay Resort on Grand Exuma in the Bahamas. The weather was bad, although I have to say I was surprised that there was apparently nowhere sheltered at all to dive around the island.

My complaint, however, is about the market held at the resort all day once a week. For an establishment that includes a dive centre and the promise of unlimited scuba diving, it seems insensitive to say the least to allow in traders to sell guests ornaments made from coral.

I could see mainly fan as well as fire and whip corals that had been mounted for sale as decorations, and they didn't look to be the sort of fragments found on beaches, either.

Sadly we've come to expect to see coral sold to tourists in this way every so often – but this sort of merchandise should have no place in a diving resort, especially if it's part of a well-known chain. Have other readers come across anything like this?

JOHN SIMMONS, QUEENSBOROUGH, KENT

Sandals Resorts International comments: We invite local, external artisans and vendors to visit the property every Monday to display their wares to our guests, and while our last inspection did not reveal any evidence of coral being sold, we have since met with all vendors to remind them that the sale of such products is prohibited from our resorts.

Sandals and our non-profit organisation the Sandals Foundation are dedicated to protecting resources through an increased leadership role in developing groundbreaking initiatives with the public and private sector, education and on-property practices.

For example, we work closely with the local Ministry and local stakeholders to manage two marine sanctuaries in Jamaica. And to raise awareness around marine biodiversity and to help support marine life in the Turks & Caicos Islands, we have also worked with marine experts to create and position a number of artificial reef-balls off the coast of the resort.



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Diver took his own life over cannon fraud

A DIVER WHO ACCOMPANIED a fraudster, now convicted, in finding historic cannon from London's Thames Estuary committed suicide because of an investigation and court action being brought over the guns' recovery and sale.

An inquest at Canterbury Magistrates' Court heard how Alan Nichols, 47, of Whitstable, was found hanged on 1 July last year, three weeks after going missing on 11 June.

As Nichols went missing, diver Vincent Woolsgrove was on trial at Southampton Crown Court charged with a fraud offence in relation to the wrongful recovery and sale of bronze cannon from the protected wreck of the 17th century warship HMS *London* (News, August 2015). He pleaded guilty and, three months later, received a two-year prison sentence.

The inquest was told that on the day he went missing Nichols took a call on his mobile phone from Woolsgrove. Nichols was out having a drink with his family, said his wife Janet, but she could not hear the conversation.

They went home and a "very quiet" Nichols left in his car. "He told me he needed to clear his head," she said.

After Nichols was reported missing police found his car, which contained a suicide note, at West Blean Nature Reserve on 12 June. His body was found in the reserve's woodland on 1 July.

A friend, Lee Dixon, told the inquest that about four weeks before Nichols' suicide, the men were out for a drink when Nichols "said he had had enough and was thinking of ending it all". Dixon had "never seen Alan like

that before" but could not get more out of him about the cause of his concern.

Dixon now realised that Nichols "was worried because he would be implicated as well".

As it turned out, Nichols had nothing to worry about. The Maritime & Coastguard Agency, which led the investigation into Woolsgrove, has confirmed that Nichols had not been included as a suspect.

"Mr Nichols was not under investigation by the MCA in relation to the illegal recovery of bronze guns or any other potential offence," it told **DIVER**.

Kent Assistant Coroner James Dillon recorded a verdict of suicide, saying: "I am satisfied that Mr Nichols took his own life and that he intended to do so. ■

DIVERS CAN HELP WITH WW1 WRECK RESEARCH

THE MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY TRUST has launched an improved online pack to guide divers on how they can help the organisation with its *Forgotten Wrecks of the First World War* project.

With £1.3 million of Lottery funding, the project began in 2014 and will run to 2018, marking the centenary years of the Great War.

It aims to establish detailed wreck survey and historical information on potentially more than 1000 wrecks in British waters.

The aim is to "raise the profile" of the conflict at sea, a "currently under-represented aspect of the Great War".

The resulting resource will be openly available to the public on WW1 military and merchant wrecks, and the story they tell about what went on at sea during the war years.

The guide to how divers and dive-clubs can assist with the project can be found at forgottenwrecks.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/index.php/divingthewrecks/divers-help

Another WW1 wrecks research project, which has also run since 2014 and continues until 2018, is the Nautical Archaeology Society's *Lost Beneath the Waves 1914-1918* programme.

Offering a different angle, it is commemoration-based, with a request that divers around the world visit WW1 wrecks to pay their respects and "mark the massive loss of life" in the conflict.

Where visits to wrecks result also in any form of archaeological evaluation, details are being collated by the NAS, www.nauticalarchaeologysociety.org/lbtw.

Stephen Fisher, a historical researcher for *Forgotten Wrecks* at the Maritime Archaeology Trust, told **DIVER** that the Trust was liaising with the NAS to compare notes over any wrecks that the two programmes have in common. ■

SCUBA SANTAS GATHER FOR CHARITY



The Santas amass at Vobster Quay.

SOMERSET'S VOBSTER QUAY has claimed a world record for the largest number of diving Santas submerged together, after 188 divers turned the site red and white at its annual fund-raising meet late last year.

As **DIVER** went to press in late December, money raised for the RNLI was still being counted but about £4000 was expected, www.vobster.com/vobstersantas

Another December Scuba Santas event was held at the National Diving & Activity Centre at Chepstow, Gloucestershire, raising money for both the RNLI and Plymouth's DDRC Healthcare. www.ndac.co.uk/ www.scuba-santas.co.uk ■



KENNI MAIDMENT

Treasure wreck promises battle over ownership



The action off Cartagena that sank the *San Jose*, as depicted by Samuel Scott.

A MAMMOTH FIGHT over rights of ownership of what could be the most valuable treasure haul in history has been ignited with the discovery off Colombia of an 18th-century Spanish vessel.

The *San Jose* was sunk by a British squadron in 1708 off the Colombian port of Cartagena, having sailed from Portobelo in today's Panama carrying gold, silver, emeralds and jewellery.

Valuations of the cargo have ranged from between US \$1-4 billion to a scarcely believable \$17 billion.

In early December the Colombian government announced that it had found the wreck using an ROV near Cartagena's island of Baru.

The ship's identity was confirmed by the *San Jose*'s unique bronze cannon with dolphin engravings.

Apart from Colombia, other South American nations from which the ship's cargo emanated may also lay claim to the wreck's contents.

Another claimant is Spain, as the *San Jose* was a national flagged vessel.

Under the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, a military wreck remains the property of its country of origin, wherever it lies.

However, Colombia is not a signatory to the convention and, under a law passed in 2013, it regards wrecks lying in its waters as its own.

A further claimant is a US-based salvage firm, Sea Search Armada. It claimed to have found the wreck in 1982, keeping its position secret, but reached no firm salvage agreement with the Colombian government.

Colombia has challenged the salvage company to reveal its co-ordinates for the wreck, to see whether they tally with the position now established.

In mid-December, Colombia and Spain stated jointly that, while differences over ownership need to be resolved, the *San Jose* should be suitably preserved and safeguarded as "a wreck that is part of the heritage of humanity". ■

Death leads to crackdown on Phuket diving operations

AUTHORITIES IN PHUKET, Thailand have announced a tightening of controls governing sports scuba-diving operators following the death of a Chinese tourist while diving in the care of a Patong-based operator.

Zhang Lin, 23, reportedly died under water near Koh Bon, off Kuraburi in Phang Nga, after becoming separated from a dive group that included an instructor, a divemaster and two advanced divers.

The reassessment is reported to include a tightening of inspections to ensure that diving operators are wholly legal entities, and that they uphold the requirement that all

clients should present a medical certificate confirming suitability to dive.

Speaking to regional press in December, Santi Pawai, Director of the Ministry of Tourism & Sports Phuket office, outlined the measures and confirmed that if failure to comply was discovered, companies' registrations could be rescinded.

Regarding the death of Zhang Lin, he said that the operator was a "legally registered dive-tour company" but that he awaited "more information from police and for the autopsy report, and I am collecting more details for my investigation". ■

THE BIG QUESTION

Inadvertent weight loss

Last month we posed this question: "Have you ever had a problem under water caused by loss of a weightbelt or of individual weights from a BC or harness?" It was prompted by the latest BSAC *Diving Incidents Report*, which highlighted an increase in problems caused by loss of weight-pouches and integrated weights. Widening the question to include conventional weightbelts, we found that almost 30% of you have inadvertently shed weight at one time or another.

NO

"I've seen it happen though!" Billy Ball

"No but I did lose a weightbelt at the surface following a giant stride." Patrick Wadsworth

"But I have on two occasions grabbed divers who were heading fast for the surface as a result of losing theirs!" Jean-Marc Jefferson

"Completing a proper pre-dive safety check should eliminate such problems." Debbie Evans

"The only cause for concern is the integration of both a weightbelt and integrated weights, and ensuring that both your buddy and instructors are aware." Kevin Jordan

"Helped others who have dropped their integrated weights and saw someone nearly hit by a dropped weight on *Dunraven*." Kevin McIlwee

"A proper buddy-check and good equipment maintenance should stop that happening!" Richard Marsden

"No problems whatsoever." Steven Amandels

"I'm careful to check that they're secure before going into the water and also split weights between belt and BC, so I should never lose all my weights at once and suffer an out-of-control ascent." Bruce Noble

YES

"I haven't lost any weight myself but I had to assist a buddy when a 1kg weight slipped from a badly closed trim-pouch. Thankfully it was only a small loss and easily solved, but it was an object lesson in why weights must be secured properly." David Tillotson

"My integrated weight pouch popped out after a diver dropped like a lunar module off the shelf onto the intermediate zone at Stoney Cove, then kicked my mask off and bashed into me, leaving a mushroom cloud of silt as I fumbled for my mask before trying to replace the pouch. Luckily my buddy came in and saved the day!" Nicholas Ray

"Pouch fell out of harness abroad because there was not enough lead in it to help keep it in place." Neil Turton

"In the Red Sea I suddenly went over to the left only to find that the right integrated pouch had come out. Got to surface safely." Matt Shippam

"I have, but not my own belt. On a training dive we were coming back up the shotline from about 20m when I noticed one of the students' weight-belt sliding down. We ended the dive with the belt around my neck and holding onto his legs throughout the safety stop. Now I ensure that all students' weight-belts are *tight*." Colin Rotheram

"Lost integrated weight on a night dive." Gillian Downes

"I lost a weight-pocket in shallow water but I recovered it easily." Robert Porter

Go to www.divernet.com to answer the next *Big Question* and you could win a £118 Luxfer 3-litre compact emergency pony cylinder from Sea & Sea. More on Luxfer cylinders at www.dive-team.com. Latest winner is Jean-Marc Jefferson, London.



THE NEXT BIG QUESTION

Which creature is top of your marine-life sighting wish-list?

Tell us what it is and feel free to tell us why

Grand Cayman suffers more reef damage by anchored cruise-ship

THE ANCHOR-CHAIN of a cruise-ship anchored off Grand Cayman destroyed a swathe of coral reef in early December – despite the fact that the ship's anchoring position had been sanctioned by the authorities.

The 12-deck, 1800-passenger *Zenith*, operated by the Madrid-based Pullmantur Cruises, a subsidiary of Royal Caribbean Cruises, dropped anchor off the island's capital, George Town. Local divers saw the damage being done to the seabed and a video was taken by one, Scott Prodahl.

His video was posted at www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3I31sXJJ0c. The divers investigated when, said

Prodahl, they noticed that the ship was "anchored oddly close to the reef". They found that "a massive portion of the reef out front from Don Fosters and Eden Rock was completely destroyed".

"We are not allowed to fish here, not allowed to hunt lobsters, you can't even pick up an empty shell, all in the name of conservation," said Prodahl. "But for some reason you can drop an anchor and wipe out a reef that took thousands of years to grow."

Yet the ship has followed local rules. "The ship's captain and the harbour pilot both acted in accordance with established procedure so there was no sign of negligence," Scott Slaybaugh,

Deputy Director of Operations & Enforcement, Department of Environment, told the *Cayman Reporter*. "The vessel was properly anchored well inside of the anchorage area."

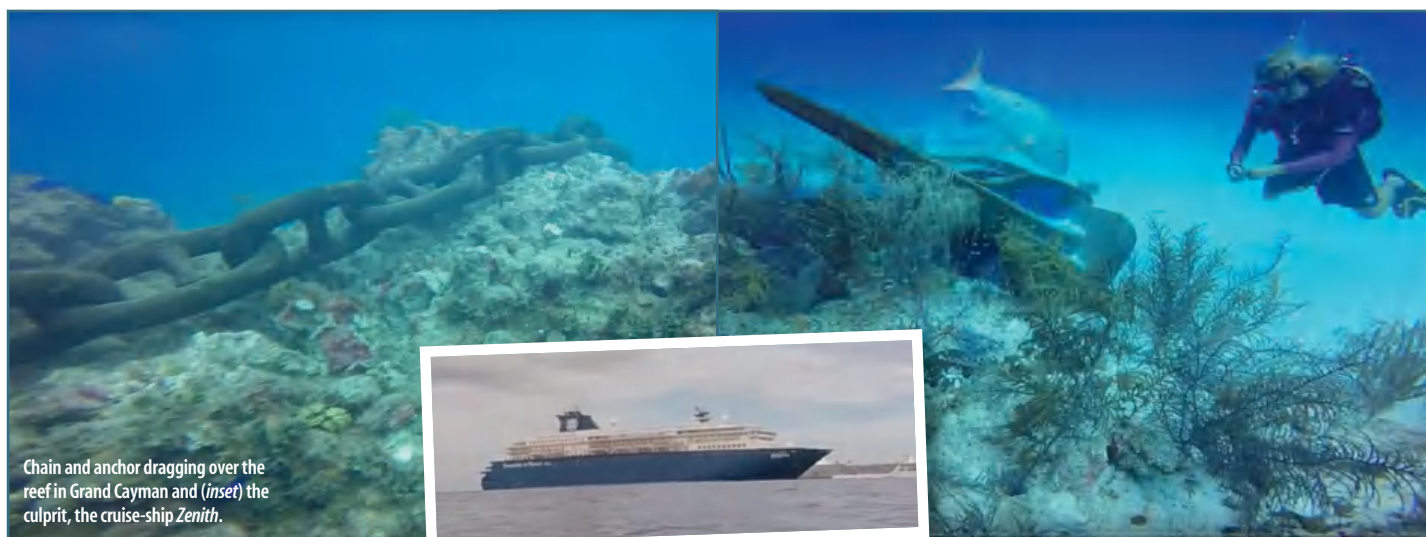
He acknowledged that, judging by Prodahl's footage, the damage seemed to be "significant".

Cayman Islands Tourism Minister Moses Kirkconnell confirmed that the Department of Environment and the Cayman Islands Port Authority were launching an investigation to establish exactly how much coral had been destroyed and how such an incident could have occurred while operating within the regulations.

The damaged reef lies not far from a large reef area laid bare by another cruise-ship in August 2014. On that occasion the ship, *Carnival Magic*, anchored erroneously, her chain sweeping some 1070sq m of reef.

Since then, divers and others have worked hard to do what they can to repair the damage, central co-ordinators being Lois Hatcher of Ocean Frontiers and Keith Sahm of Sunset House.

In 1996 yet another cruise-ship, the *Maasdam*, dropped its anchor on a shallow coral area at George Town, damaging 700sq m. A restoration project was completed by local divers, including Hatcher. ■



Chain and anchor dragging over the reef in Grand Cayman and (inset) the culprit, the cruise-ship *Zenith*.

SCOTT PRODAHL

LATEST HELP FROM SEA-CHANGERS

SEA-CHANGERS, the UK charity that raises funds to support other charities' marine conservation projects, has announced its latest tranche of grants, with sums from £400 to £1000 going to six groups.

The beneficiaries are Newquay Marine Group, Cetacean Research &

Rescue Unit, Tucked In Productions, Stable Isotope Biogeochemistry Laboratory, Refill Bristol and Manx Whale and Dolphin Watch.

For more on what those groups do, and on Sea-Changers, which marks its fifth anniversary in May, go to www.sea-changers.org.uk ■

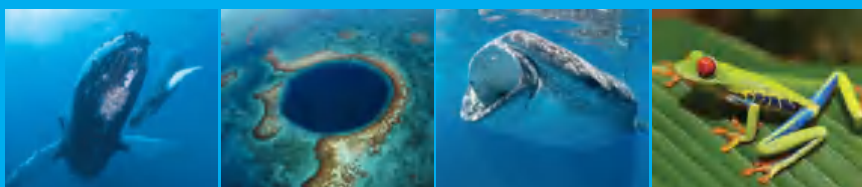
Mulberry plaque at Selsey

A COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE was placed on the Far Mulberry wreck off Selsey, West Sussex by the Selsey Bill branch of the British Sub-Aqua Club late last year.

The plaque recognises the part the people of Selsey and its environs played in producing the

Mulberry harbours "that proved so important in supporting the Allied troops following the D-Day landings in Normandy in the Second World War". It is fixed 12m down to the concrete that made up the A1 Phoenix unit. www.selseybillsubaquaclub.co.uk ■

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FILIPINO WINS MISS SCUBA INTERNATIONAL



Miss Scuba International Cindy Madduma is flanked by runners-up Kiara Ajello (left) and Tessa Ptacek.

THE FIFTH ANNUAL Miss Scuba International competition announced its winner late last year.

Cindy Madduma, 27, from the Philippines, took the crown among a group of 18 finalists – all winners of their national heats – who gathered at Magellan Sutra Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia.

She also won the event's Miss Marine Conservation and Best in National Costume sub-categories.

Kiara Ajello of Venezuela placed second and Tessa Ptacek, from the USA, third.

The event was created by Robert Lo in 2011 both as a pageant and as a means of focusing on the marine environment. All participants need to hold a scuba-diving qualification and to show an active dedication to some aspect of marine-conservation work.

The finalists are accommodated together for two weeks, during the first of which they go diving together and get to know about each other's marine-conservation activities.

In week two come local community touring duties and the final judging process. This includes on-stage interviews to show personality and knowledge of marine-conservation and scuba-tourism issues, along with the beauty and fashion-show elements of appearance and catwalk presentation. www.misscuba.com ■

GUINNESS RECORD ATTEMPT FAILS

A DIVER WHO AIMED to smash the Guinness world record for the longest dive in warm water had to pull out after his drysuit failed – but dived again with a buddy to create a new Guinness record category, that of the longest period spent under water while buddy-breathing.

Keith Sagray, who has 25 years' experience as a commercial saturation and recreational diver, made the solo attempt in Coral World Marine Park at St Thomas in the Virgin Islands in early December.

Sitting on the seabed at a depth of 9m, he aimed to spend more than 100 hours under water to break the

standing record of 72 hours.

A support team was on hand to keep him supplied with air, food, water and communications. A waterproofed iPad kept him amused. However, after 35 hours a leak began in the suit's left foot. The water spread, hypothermia set in and the attempt had to be abandoned.

A second dive encountered further problems and, on a third and final attempt, the suit's electrical heating system malfunctioned, giving the diver a shock and causing burns and blisters.

After due rest, Sagray changed tack and joined up with Kevin Rodgers, a

scuba instructor in California who has worked with Sagray as a saturation diver. The pair spent eight hours buddy-breathing near Coral World's underwater observatory tower, and an application has been made to Guinness for the dive to be ratified as a new category of world record.

The dives have been used to raise funds for the Make a Wish Foundation, with a high target of \$1 million. The project's website is at projectnautilus.org although, as **DIVER** went to press in late December, updates under News & Events ended with a posting on 28 November about training dives for the 100-hour attempt. ■



PORBEAGLE ON FILM

A FRENCH DIVER and amateur underwater video-maker has captured clear footage of a porbeagle shark off Perros-Guirec, in North Brittany. Good photographic records of porbeagles in Channel waters are unusual, so Didier Brémont's footage is a rare treat. The one-minute clip can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWPb7EqJJSE, and more of Brémont's work can be seen at www.bremont-didier.com ■



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NHS deal increases effectiveness of northern Scottish chambers

RECOMPRESSION CHAMBERS in Oban and Orkney have been placed under the jurisdiction of Scotland's National Hyperbaric Service, adding to the organisation's primary service in Aberdeen.

Operating under commission from NHS National Services Scotland, the National Hyperbaric Service will ensure that the more northerly chambers, situated in areas popular with divers, are part of a system able to provide "a safe and sustainable hyperbaric medicine service for people with decompression illness across Scotland".

As such the Oban and Orkney units,

run previously from local budgets, now receive guaranteed NHS funding to provide an effective service at all times to complement Aberdeen Royal Infirmary's main Category One facility.

"It is important to have the appropriate number of hyperbaric chambers in the right places to balance access to care with maintenance of specialist skills, in order to provide a safe and sustainable hyperbaric medicine service for divers across Scotland," said Dr Mike Winter of NHS National Services Scotland on the scheme's announcement in early December.

"The three chambers will operate as

a national service ensuring that anyone who requires hyperbaric oxygen therapy for diving decompression illness will be able to access it."

Cathie Cowan, Chief Executive, NHS Orkney said: "The national funding for the independent chambers is a significant assistance to small NHS boards like NHS Orkney, which could face significant invoices for treatments that would compromise our budgets for other services.

"It also enables the chambers to plan the delivery of their services with agreed guaranteed income."

Dr Andy Trevett, of Orkney

Hyperbaric Trust, said: "This is a very welcome development. It provides stability, clear governance and clinical infrastructure throughout Scotland which will allow a safe, cost-effective and high-quality service."

The telephone number for reporting DCI incidents in Scotland was also changed in early December. The emergency line 0345 408 6008, which connects to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, replaces an 0845 number.

The number for England, Wales and Northern Ireland is 07831 151523, connecting to a helpline run by the British Hyperbaric Association and Royal Navy. ■

New investigation launched into UK seal deaths



A FRESH BID to understand the causes of fatalities among England's seals has been launched by a key national research organisation.

The Zoological Society of London is carrying out the work with funding from Natural England.

ZSL says it is conducting "an intensive six-month investigation of deceased seals recovered from around the English coast".

It is calling on the public "to support this important work by continuing to

report sightings of any dead seals".

Threats to seals include fishing bycatch, ship-strike and entanglement in marine debris, as well as the possible risk of future outbreaks of diseases such as influenza A (H10N7) and phocine distemper virus (PDV).

Reports in relation to stranded seals, dead or alive, can be directed to the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP) hotline 0800 652 0333, or email strandings@zsl.org ■

Angels & trolls

SINCE I ANNOUNCED my intention to attempt to break the Guinness world record for the deepest dive by a woman, the response I have had both in person and online has been overwhelming.

I'm working alongside Leo Morales, who is attempting his own record for deepest dive by a disabled diver, and of course this has drawn comparisons between us.

For me, the most interesting difference has been in the reactions received online. These have been mainly positive, but there will always be a number of people who disagree with what we're doing.

I have spoken to many personally, and have enjoyed having the opportunity to explain my reasons to people who are willing to listen.

I have had some tell me straight that they oppose all depth records, but then say that they are willing to look over plans or



by Jenny Lord

COUNTDOWN gas-mixes to make sure that I will be as safe as possible – especially after I clarify that I'm not on some kind of suicide mission and that I'm doing this to enhance, I hope, the safety of decompression diving for other "recreational" technical divers.

I have had others say that I'm certain to die and that I'm an idiot.

Funnily enough, the latter group refuse to listen to any explanations or even to ask questions of their own, past the leading ones that will give them the answers that

appear to justify their suppositions.

Even worse are the ones who hide behind their keyboards, commonly known as trolls.

I have seen several discussions (perhaps I wasn't supposed to, but they were on an open forum) that have happily discussed my supposed impending death while making gross assumptions about me, my team and the wider diving community.

While tempted to clarify some points, I have heeded the advice of several more cool-headed friends of mine who've told me: "Don't feed the trolls."

I then compare that to the reaction Leo

gets. Leo is very straightforward when explaining the reasons behind his dive. He is doing it simply to show people that life goes on, even after what you believe is the worst thing in the world happens to you.

Perhaps it's the way he explains it (despite having to communicate in his second language, he is incredibly eloquent), perhaps it's just him (like a big teddy bear you want to hug) or perhaps it's the depth he is going to (a very respectable 150m) but I have seen nothing but positivity for his attempt.

In my former life I taught kayaking, and the kayaking community and the diving community have much in common, with one major exception; in almost every case, if a kayaker is trying something "extreme", the community support him.

Their reason? It's that most of the time that person is showing what the human race is capable of.

I believe it's capable of much, much more than we currently know, and I can't wait to help show the world it is possible to not only do more, but to do it safely. ■

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Baja California gains wreck attraction

The new diving attraction off Mexico's Pacific coast, the *Uribe*, in the process of being sunk.

THE WRECK OF a decommissioned patrol boat has been sunk as the first artificial reef off Baja California, north-west Mexico.

The 67m-long, former Mexican navy vessel *Uribe* was placed on the seabed two miles off Rosarito Beach, in about 28m of water.

The sinking comes after an eight-year, \$600,000 campaign to establish the first piece of what will become a varied marine attraction in the bay Bahia Descanso, near Puerto Nuevo, some 50 miles from San Diego, USA.

Other pieces planned to be placed

on the seabed include other vessels and a series of statues and other sculptures, as part of a push to establish a fresh diving tourism venue in Baja California.

At least half of the cost of procuring the *Uribe*, transporting it to the area and preparing it for sinking was borne by the city of Rosarito Beach, where income is substantially dependent on tourism.

Rosarito Ocean Sports, which runs three dive boats, is one PADI centre running regular trips out to the wreck. www.rosaritoceansports.com



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Great white sharks on the ropes

A STUDY BY SOUTH AFRICA'S University of Stellenbosch has concluded that the genetic diversity of great white sharks regionally is very low and inbred, indicating a developing weakness in the population because of low numbers available for reproduction.

Sharks from which samples were taken came from only three known lineages, with 89% of sharks sampled sharing the same lineage.

"This low diversity could jeopardise

the future survival of the species, and lead to possible extinction," said the project report. The findings could "lead to their ICUN status being reviewed and further conservation measures put in place".

From 2010 to 2014, the researchers collected 302 samples from whites off South African coasts, and obtained thousands of photographic recordings of sharks' dorsal fins, similarity of which can indicate close relations.

"Genetic diversity is an important



A skin sample is taken from a great white shark for genetic analysis.



A skin sample is passed from spear to storage tube.

indicator of the health of a population; the higher the diversity, the easier it is for a species to survive unexpected changes in the environment or lethal diseases," said study director Dr Sara Andreotti.

"With good population diversity,

there will always be individuals that are able to adapt to a new situation and survive, but if an entire population shares the same genetic information, depression by inbreeding and environmental changes can lead to extinction." ■





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Scubapro recalls some Galileo units

A "LIMITED NUMBER" of recent models of Uwatec Galileo Luna and Sol dive computers are being recalled because of fears that the screen might freeze.

Manufacturer Scubapro says a small number of incidents have been reported, but no injuries. As a result, it is voluntarily recalling Galileo Luna computers with serial numbers from 150422 0058 001 to 150903 0338 005, and Sol units 150423 0202 001 to 150921 0001 005. The number is stamped on the back of the computer.

Owners are requested to stop using the units immediately and return them to an authorised Scubapro dealer. Free replacements will be sent out.

Users can click on "Galileo Recall" at www.scubapro.com or contact technik@johnsonoutdoors.com for more information. Scubapro stresses that all other Galileo versions and serial numbers are unaffected. ■

RGS talks for the Scuba Trust

ANNUAL DIVING LECTURES, organised by London Diving Chamber in aid of Scuba Trust, are to take place at the Royal Geographical Society in London on the evening of 9 March.

Dive Lectures 2016 – the 17th year of the lectures programme – features marine biologists Graham Hancock and Pat Spain. The opening presentation is given by Lord John Prescott, a keen diver.

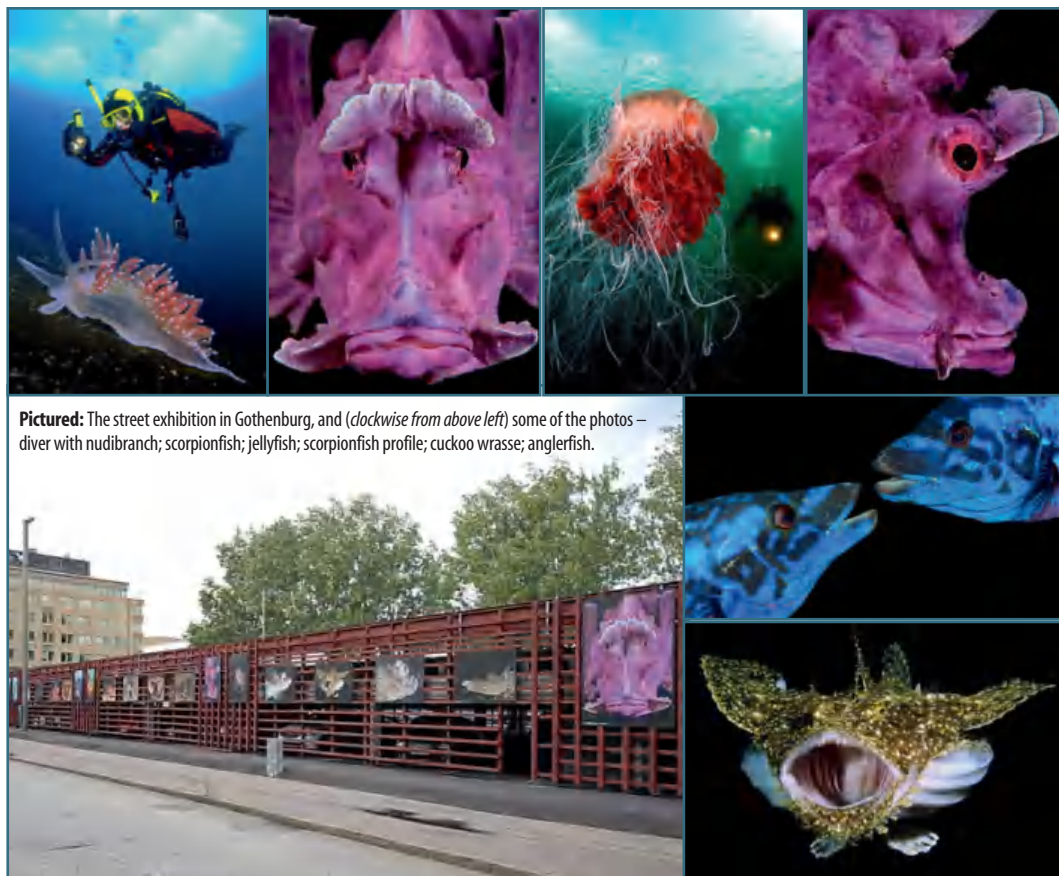
Hancock has written a number of international best-selling books and discussed on TV and radio among other things diving ancient ruins.

Spain, visiting from Boston, USA, mixes wildlife and marine biology with adventure projects worldwide. He is a TV presenter on the Nat Geo Wild channel.

Entrance is free, says London Diving Chamber, so "please ensure that you help us to fill those Scuba Trust buckets on the night".

The trust teaches people with disabilities to dive, and organises trips for them. The chamber says that the lectures are the Trust's "biggest fund-raising event of the year".

Online reservation of tickets is advised. www.londondivingchamber.co.uk/index.php?id=events ■



Pictured: The street exhibition in Gothenburg, and (clockwise from above left) some of the photos – diver with nudibranch; scorpionfish; jellyfish; scorpionfish profile; cuckoo wrasse; anglerfish.

Underwater world comes to car park

A DIVE-CLUB in Gothenburg, Sweden has created an underwater photography exhibition with a difference – by mounting its images in the open air where the general public can see them freely.

City authorities have allowed the club DK Sjökorna to display 53 large

images, measuring up to 2.5m x 1.7m, on the outside wall of an indoor car park, in a position where many pedestrians and occupants of passing vehicles will see the display.

Sponsored by the parking company, which funded printing of the pictures on aluminium using a

technique that allows outdoor display, the images were taken by 18 of the club's members.

Marine creatures from varied climes are portrayed, from the colder waters of Sweden, Norway and Canada to warmer seas in the Canary Islands, Red Sea, Philippines and Indonesia. ■

Wildlife photo competition: register soon



Cuban Survivor, by 2015 Amphibians & Reptiles finalist Mirko Zanni of Switzerland.

DIVING PHOTOGRAPHERS around the world have until Thursday, 25 February to submit their entries to the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2016 competition.

The prestigious annual contest, now in its 52nd year, has a range of terrestrial and marine categories, as well as crossover categories that cover both land and water creatures, such as Animal Behaviour.

Traditionally, aquatic photography has featured well in the final cut of about 100 images chosen for the competition's exhibition, which opens each October at London's National History Museum and runs there until the following spring.

It then tours other cities in the UK and abroad. Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2015 (News, December) is currently on display at the NHM until 10 April. www.wildlifephotographeroftheyear.com ■

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

Communicating under water isn't easy. Sometimes you just have to do the best you can and hope it isn't going to end up with an ambulance ride.

Imagine this, at an inland site not too far away. You're heading back to the surface and can half-taste the post-dive sausage booty when you're suddenly joined by a wild-eyed ball of almost-but-not-quite panic, hyperventilating and frantically trying to get your attention.

Sternly suppressing the urge to simply swim off and save yourself, you look over the distressed diver and try to figure out what's wrong. He's wearing a back-mounted single plus a side-slung stage, from which he's currently breathing and towards the mouthpiece of which he's frantically gesticulating. Something wrong with the stage seems a safe bet.

Well, the hose on it is so short that he has to keep his head turned to the left, so maybe the hose has got caught and it's freaking him out?

Nope, it's just a very short hose plumbed to the wrong side of the reg so it has to turn two 180° bends to get to his mouth.

And then you realise that he isn't heavy-breathing – the reg is freeflowing. 'Course it is, freshwater site, cold weather, not unusual, and there's an easy cure – turn the gas off and on again. Doesn't always work, but it's a good starter.

Which brings me back to communication, and this month's Top Tip.

If you ever turn off the gas supply that is the only thing keeping a diver who is already near to panic alive, telling him first is a really, really good idea.

all-black special-ops-inspired power drill, absolutely perfect for all my stealth-drilling needs. A snip at just £1500.

You can also get a special headlamp and a bag to keep your battery-charger dry, plus a diving tool-belt that doesn't look anything like a gun-belt and holster.

Gimme!

Endless selfies

This, however, I do not need. But you might. It takes all sorts.

The iBubble is the world's first wireless and autonomous underwater drone camera. You launch it at the start of your dive and it follows you around like a faithful old Labrador, shooting continuous movie footage of you enjoying the underwater world. It's a bit like the ubiquitous GoPro, only better because you get to star in your own diving movies.

My old mate Jim would love one. He watched the footage his buddy Stan had recorded on a dive off Oban, and whined that he wasn't on some of the shots, so an iBubble sounds perfect for him.

Hateful eight

And finally, if it all goes pear-shaped, change the rules and try again.

Keith Sagray and Kevin Rodgers had been training hard for an attempt on the record for the world's longest saltwater scuba-dive, and had repeated problems.

Nothing serious, but it meant that they missed out on the record not once, but three times.

So they decide to regroup, and when they looked around for another record to have a go at, they discovered that there was no current record for buddy-breathing.

They had a quick discussion, decided that for an inaugural record eight hours would be a decent performance and off they went to do it.

Which they did, and Rodgers summed up the achievement in one word when he described the dive as "miserable".

In at deep end

USA Today recently ran an article featuring its suggestions for the 10 best sites for your first-ever dive.

It can't have been an easy choice to make, what with the USA being such a big place, but the last site on the list sounded familiar. Dutch Springs is an old quarry with a plane and a bus and other stuff for divers to look at.

That one wasn't what really caught my eye, however. Site number three on the list was the Bonne Terre Mine, as featured in **DIVER** last June.

That's an abandoned, flooded mine. As in no clear surface, tunnels, dark, the whole nine yards.

To be fair, they do try-dives in an underground lake and they've installed lights so it isn't pitch black and there are old mining trucks to look at, so you don't actually do your try-dive in a full-cave environment, but even so, that would be an amazing first entry in your logbook.

be marked "A. Keith and Sons Brewery", and had been made in England by a company called Rouse, which supplied them as beer bottles to the Canadian brewery until 1890. The brewery is still going strong, though it's now known as Alexander Keith.

All of which is interesting, but not half as interesting as the fact that the bottle was still sealed by a cork firmly rammed into the neck, and was half-full of a cloudy, sudsy liquid. Genuine 19th century beer. Yum!

A local beer enthusiast is salivating over the prospect of tasting it, convinced that there's a 99% chance it won't be poisonous and fully aware that it'll probably taste awful, which sounds like devotion to beer that could awe even a BSAC member.

Jon isn't so sure, and he's currently got the bottle stashed in his toilet cistern, hoping that the regular change of water will leach the salt from the cork until he decides to try it.

This time it was a story headed *Freediving While Holding Your Breath May Harm Your Heart*.

Well, yes, was my first thought, but it won't do your heart half as much harm as trying to breathe while freediving, an activity more widely known as drowning.

The article was about a German research study looking at how the heart functions when you hold your breath. More specifically, it was about what happened to the hearts of elite freedivers when they held their breath for around five minutes.

Astonishingly, their hearts coped well at the start but, as time went on, they began to fail. Well, yes, that's because they were suffocating, which is like drowning, only dry.

And when they started to breathe again their heart function recovered back to normal. It would, wouldn't it?

Doesn't it give you a warm feeling all over when the experts confirm the blindingly obvious?

Breathtaking logic

Sometimes I look at a headline and find myself thinking a facepalm. You know, that moment when you drop your forehead into your hand in disbelief at what you're seeing?

Power mad

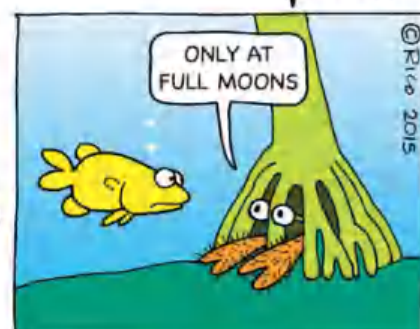
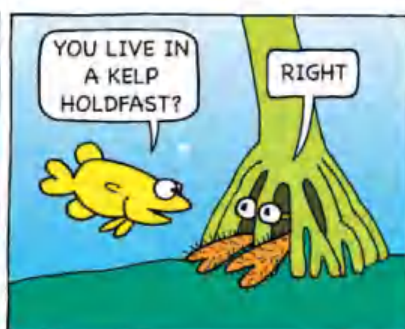
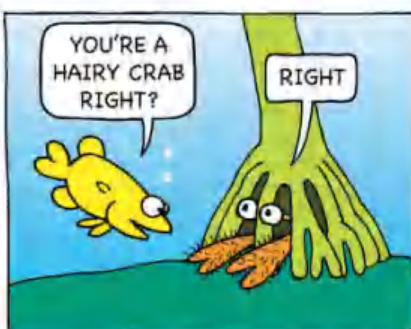
I wish I'd seen this before Christmas.

Nemo Power Tools sells a 100m-rated

Vintage ale

Jon Crouse was diving off Halifax, Nova Scotia when he found an old bottle and took it home to clean up. It turned out to

Sea People



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MALTA'S



To enjoy the wreck-diving possibilities of Malta to the full, it helps if

you're a technical diver.

CATH BATES went to see how many good dives mixed gas would enable her to fit into a week

GHOST FLEET

MALTA HAS AN ENTIRE ghost fleet of ships from all corners of history, and not only from the two world wars. There are paddle-steamers, destroyers, aircraft, ferries, submarines and battleships. Some are deep, some shallow, some hard and some easy. So where on Earth should I start?

There are more monuments in Malta per square metre than in any other country, and the same must go for the sheer volume of wreck-sites.

Having recently finished working for a dive-centre myself, I figured that the best way to decide on the wrecks to feature in this article would be to ask the opinion of the local experts.

Where would they choose to go if they had a week off diving for fun in Malta?

The country I am sent to visit after spending 11 years working in Egypt has one of the lowest Muslim populations in the world, but the Arabs did conquer the islands in 870AD, and their influence is evident in the otherwise heavily Christian architecture, and also in the language.

Malta hosts 100,000 divers each year, a massive achievement for such a small location. Flight prices from the UK are more than reasonable and additional dive-bag charges low.

Three and 4* accommodation is affordable and there are plenty of cheap eateries and *après*-dive bars.

I took my equipment to Dive/Techwise and met my guide Steve Scerri and the owners of the centre, Alan and Viv Whitehead. Alan is a Platinum Course Director for PADI and an Instructor Trainer for TDI, DSAT and IANTD.

Techwise is "GUE-friendly" but does not alienate non-GUE divers in any way. Alan has a great sense of humour ("they Go Up Eventually...") while maintaining an emphasis on safety.

He is clearly a highly skilled technical instructor and is in the water most days, while Viv, a bubbly redhead, is in charge of logistics and runs a well-organised office.

Steve gave up his "proper" job recently to become a full-time instructor, and is very much in love with his JJ rebreather. He discussed dive-planning at length, always gave an interesting dive-briefing and even blended our gas for us.

The staff were up-front – they didn't once promise to deliver something they couldn't, or gloss over what was out of their hands, such as weather conditions.



Above: Welcome sign at Gozo Technical Diving.

Left: A diver uses a DPV to help explore the *Um el Faroud* wreck.

Below left: Alan and Steve from Dive/Techwise.

Below: Exploring Lighter X127.

Lighter X127

According to Alan, the Lighter X127 is "the most historically interesting wreck in all of Malta". It was involved in helping the injured in WW1's Gallipoli Landings.

David Mallard, who finally determined in 2003 that the wreck was that of the X127, has dived with Alan a lot.

The wreck is accessible via Manoel Island, and after descending just a few steps into the green harbour water, you come across it within a few minutes.

The bow is at 5m, but we followed the port side to begin our dive at the deepest part, the stern, at just 22m.

The simple multi-level profile along the wreck's furry 35m length is easy even for an Open Water Diver.

We weaved our way up, looking into

the engine-room with its 5.5-tonne twin-cylinder Campbell engine. X127 was initially a water-carrier, and from the deck you can see six hatches, with both water-tanks and Tangye pumps inside.

During WW1 she became a rescue vessel, helping to remove troops and horses from battle. The footholds for the horses are on the foredeck.

Nicknamed Black Beetles, these ships were designed like Thames river barges to handle steep beaches.

It was in Malta that the vessel went back to being a water-carrier and fuel-oil lighter. On 6 March, 1942, the submarine base where she rested in Marsamxett Harbour was bombed. She caught fire, listed and sank at a 20° angle.

The bomb damage can be seen clearly amidships on the portside deck. Other features are the dinghy davits, chain-locker and gun platform.

At the spoon-shaped bow you leave the X127 and make your way back during a leisurely safety stop to the staircase to exit.

Um el Faroud

Wied-iz-Zurriq translates from Arabic to "Blue Grotto", and just around the headland of this Marine Protected Area is the famous limestone-arch tourist attraction.

The simple entry and exit for this dive is however in a valley of Bombay Sapphire-coloured water that penetrates the rock.

A wide staircase takes you down to the sea, where you then have a 200m swim to the wreckage. Against a mild current this took us around 10 minutes above swaying seagrass that resembled fields of heather.

The *Um El Faroud* is described as Malta's *Thistlegorm*. I would agree insofar as it is large and has many interesting features, though of course it lacks the historical interest.

This 3147-ton single-screw tanker was scuttled on 2 September, 1998. The wreck's 110m length sits upright in two sections on the seabed at 35m.

Its size allows it to be dived by differing certification levels from Advanced Open Water (the bridge is shallowest at 16m) to Extended Range.

Um El Faroud is often used by dive-centres as a Wreck Speciality training site, and for entry-level tec. Doors and windows were removed before scuttling, so it is easily penetrated.

I dived with twin 32% nitrox and a



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50% stage at a maximum depth of 33m. Once you pass a large plinth sporting a diver's helmet the wreck looms into view.

Spend time at the large winch at the bow, swim through the side gangways, ascend contorted stairwells and feel small on the 16m-wide deck, most of it adorned with sea fans.

In front of the windows at the helm a brass plaque was placed in memory of the workers who died in an explosion while they were repairing the tanker in Valetta's Grand Harbour.

Leaving the wreck at the funnel, we headed back to the valley walls, where I watched octopus feeding. Thanks to the multi-level profile of the site I had almost cleared deco by the time I reached the exit point after 65 minutes.

HMS Hellespont

The HMS *Hellespont* was my first boat dive in Malta. We boarded the Divewise speedboat *Diversion* just outside the Grand Harbour and were soon dropping a shotline down to the rare paddle-wheeled steamer tug.

Launched in 1910, the *Hellespont* came to Malta from Ireland in 1922. Although she was scuttled, she was initially hit by Axis aircraft during an air raid in 1942.

The wreck sits in 45m and we followed the line down blessed with good visibility and a mild current.

The wooden paddles have been removed, but you can still see the metal shaft that moved them.

I also saw the remains of the engine with its piston-rods and a boiler. The helm is in good condition.

The *Hellespont* is a relatively small wreck and covered in algae. Sadly it is also adorned with fishing-net and buoys, but I was pleased to see more fish than I had on my previous day's shore-diving – mainly schooling bream and eels.

The Maltese Tourist Association



Above, clockwise from top left: Anchor-winch on the *Um el Faroud*; memorial plaque on the same wreck; traditional luzzu-style boat.

Below, left and right: Views of the Bristol Beaufighter aircraft wreck.

mentioned to me that it doesn't buoy the wrecks around the island, as this keeps fishermen away from them.

I dived with twin nitrox 28% and a 50% stage and accumulated 25 minutes of deco in midwater, with the shotline as visual reference.

Bristol Beaufighter

From the mouth of St Julian's Bay we headed out with the speedboat to the Bristol Beaufighter late in the afternoon,

and were on the wreck in minutes. This was my first plane wreckage but I wasn't convinced that much time could be spent on an area as small as 13m by 8m.

The Beaufighter, a twin-engine strike and torpedo aircraft, failed while climbing to meet other planes on a shipping strike in 1943. The pilot was forced to ditch at a speed of 100mph as he lost altitude following engine failure.

The wreck lies upside-down on the sandy seabed at 38m. This makes the dive more interesting, as you can see the undercarriage, fuselage and landing gear, with a sad deflated tire atop the wheel.

The port engine has one remaining prop and, amazingly after all this time, you can still see both engines, wings and also some of the tail-section feet away.

There is a fixed mooring direct to the wreck and I found plenty of marine life – moray eels, scorpionfish and tubeworms.

I refilled my 28% back-gas for this dive and enjoyed a 40-minute total dive time with little decompression. This is a very easy dive on which you don't even need a guide, and is a great little training site –



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Alan was teaching skills in the early stages of a normoxic Inspiration CCR course while we were off exploring.

Above and right: Divers on HMS *Stubborn*.

HMS Stubborn

Nicknamed “the underwater cigar” by local divers, the submarine HMS *Stubborn* sits upright on the sandy seabed at 57m. *Stubborn* held the record for deepest dive ever by a submarine, to 165m.

We took a traditional *luzzu* boat out from St Paul’s Bay. There was plenty of room for my guide and me on open-circuit trimix 20/40, three Swedes on Pelagian CCRs, an Inspiration and a JJ, in addition to a wide array of loud Swedish swimwear!



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Stubborn begins to come into view at around 35m in azure water at a toasty 24°. The sub lists to starboard and despite a crusty coating of molluscs has a silhouette as perfect as the day it was built.

At 43m, the temperature rapidly dropped. By the time we reached the torpedo-tubes I registered 17° (mainly in the face!). The Swedish team in their 5mm wetsuits swam past, and I began to feel warm again.

The 70m *Stubborn* is so intact that you can almost hear the sonar ping. The open hatch at the conning-tower and the missing tail-fin are the only clues that this is not a working sub.

Stubborn came to rest off Qawra Point in northern Malta in 1946, as an ASDIC target. She had a colourful life following her launch – in 1943 she supported craft attacking the battleship *Tirpitz*; in 1944 she escaped numerous attacks by seven ships in the Norwegian Sea (including 36 depth charges), and she went on to work in Australia and the Pacific.

Marine life was ample – anemones, devil scorpionfish, massive hermit crabs, urchins and numerous sponges.

On our journey to the dive-site we passed big circular tuna farms, and while I carried out my deco along the shotline, I couldn’t help feeling what a shame it was that we weren’t seeing some of these big boys passing in the blue.

Le Polynésien

Le Polynésien cannot be seen in one dive. Its 152m bulk is nicknamed the Plate Ship, as it was carrying a lot of ceramic and glass cargo. I had a 20-minute bottom-time with a run-time of one hour and saw only the midsection.

Again, this wreck was a perfect normoxic trimix dive, with a blend of 20/40 plus deco gas.

Le Poly is historically interesting both to dive and read about. She was built in 1890 in France as a passenger liner and worked as a freighter there for many years until 1914, when she was requisitioned by the French government as a troopship.

A U-boat torpedoed her as she approached Malta on 10 August, 1918, and she went down fast, with 10 lives lost. Locals call her “Malta’s *Titanic*”.

The wreck lies between 53 and 70m, listing to port at 45°. The cargo holds are large but you should take a guide who knows the wreck well, because they are dark and the exits are not obvious.

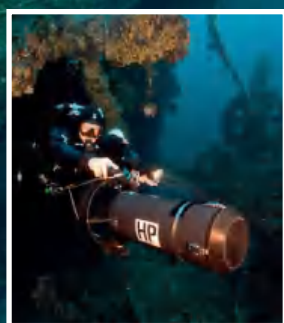
I swam over hundreds of bottles of champagne and motorcycle tyres before spending the remaining minutes on the shallower upper starboard side and timber deck, where I found a surreally placed urinal!

Had I had more time, I would have loved to have returned to see the guns 📸



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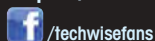
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at the bow and stern. There was more fish life on *Le Polynisien* than all of the other wrecks I dived that week – of course, being further out to sea there was more current. I enjoyed seeing large schools of bream, butterflyfish and barracuda.

Imperial Eagle

My favourite wreck to photograph in Malta was the *Imperial Eagle*. There were no other divers on it except our team, and I found the skeleton of the rotten bow an area of imposing beauty.

I used up more of my memory card on the *Eagle* than on any of the other wrecks. In fact I found it difficult to tear myself away from the upper deck, bridge and bridgehouse wheel of this 45m passenger ferry.

The ship was scuttled off Qawra Point in Malta's first marine park in July 1999, landing in an upright position. The statue of Christ that sits just off the bow was sunk nine years earlier, watched by Pope John Paul, and later moved to be near the wreckage.

The *Eagle* began life as a Royal Navy transport ship in 1938, and went on to carry out port-defence duties, Thames dock cruises and finally ferry service in Malta and Gozo from 1957 until the 1970s.

I took a twin-set topped off from my previous day, which gave me a trimix 26/17. With a 50% stage, I had an enjoyable 72-minute runtime.

The *Imperial Eagle* could carry 70 passengers and 10 cars. There were many areas with easy swim-throughs, and a more complicated engine-room. This is a perfect dive for sidemount training and entry-level technical divers, as the wreck



Above, from top: HMS *Stubborn*, and kit waiting to go to that site.

Below, from left: Christ statue near *Imperial Eagle*; helm of that wreck; bow of the *Hellespont*.

is in a maximum depth of just 42m.

My guide even gave me a short tour of the rocky reef next to the wreck, which rewarded us with a leopard seaslug.

The deco on this wreck was far less boring than on some of the deeper wrecks, with the 8m Christ reaching up to us from the swaying seagrass below.

However, with rough surface

conditions as the week's kind weather began to change, I found myself being thrown around unpleasantly in the swell on a 6m spot!

Karwela

I took the 25-minute ferry ride over to Gozo, which is much greener and more rural and has far less traffic than Malta.

Gozo Technical Diving professes to be "GUE-minded but open-minded", teaching TDI, PADI, ANDI and ISE courses up to instructor level, under the mentorship of Tom Steiner and his partner Audrey Cudel.

The couple took on the centre when it was no more than a "chicken shed". With a lot of TLC they have created a very stylish building with state-of-the-art equipment and technology, and with access to a 4.5m-deep training pool.

Their creative streak is evident in the T-shirt design, quirky signs and artwork in the classroom. Tom's reputation affords them a loyal clientele who use him to continue their training year after year, but Audrey seems to be catching him up with her high quality of sidemount-, cave- and cavern-training. She describes them as people who are always teaching, even when not paid specifically to do so.

We drove to the entry site of the mv *Karwela* in one of the centre's pickups. The stairs and facilities down to the entry area are ample, yet getting in with camera, fins and stage tank required some assistance from my buddy Matt Jevon, a JJ instructor and friend of Tom and Audrey from Ireland.

The *Karwela* was a passenger ferry that worked between Malta and Gozo from 1986 until its demise, and had capacity for 863 passengers. She was scuttled with the *Cominoland*, which lies close by, on the same date in August 2006 and is described by Audrey as "the finest of the three Gozo wrecks".





KARWELA PHOTOS BY AUDREY CUDEL

It's a short 80m swim from the rugged coastline to the *Karwela*, which lies in 33–45m. Initially you just see the bubbles of other divers emerging from the bridge.

We made three penetrations, one in the engine-room, one in the deep bridge and one down a central stairwell.

Again, all doors and windows were removed before the sinking, so this is

Clockwise from above: Approaching and inside the *Karwela*.

Below: Entry point to the *Karwela* wreck.

clearly an ideal site on which sidemount divers can cut their teeth.

Audrey took me around the *Karwela* like a sidemount siren, without one awkward movement. She glided through doorways and stairwells effortlessly.

My eyes were almost as drawn to her as they were the wreck. It was a pleasure to meet this strong-willed, highly skilled

woman in the male-dominated world of technical diving.

Avoiding a less-than-glamorous exit where we entered, Audrey took us on a longer, more scenic route via a boulder reef covered in sea fir. This enabled us to complete the deco of a 71-minute dive in less static surroundings. We exited easily up a metal ladder to flat limestone rock, where our truck met us.

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Cath flew from London Heathrow with Air Malta, www.airmalta.com

DIVING ▶ Divewise & Techwise offers open and closed circuit – rec and full tec – for training and guided dives. RIB dives are available, www.divewise.com.mt. Gozo Diving offers guided and unguided shore- and boat-dives on single tank or sidemount. It has a guesthouse above it called the Mariblu and can also recommend self-catering apartments and hotels, www.gozodiving.com

ACCOMMODATION ▶ Cath stayed B&B at both the 3* Sunflower and 4* Santana hotels located near St Paul's Bay. St Julian's Bay is closer to Divewise but much noisier, www.sunroutehotels.com

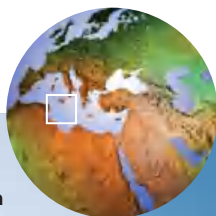
WHEN TO GO ▶ Cath travelled in October and the water was still 24°C above 40m. Summer months can bring roasting temperatures for technical divers in drysuits.

MONEY ▶ Euro.

HEALTH ▶ Recompression facilities at the Msida Hospital in Malta and one in Gozo.

PRICES ▶ Flights, £120 return. A Divewise six-boat-dive rec package costs 75 euros and the tec equivalent 220 euros. With Gozo Diving a six-shore-dive package is 150 euros. Guided tec prices range from 50 euros for a 40–45m deco dive up to 120 euros for a 60–70m trimix dive.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.visitmalta.com



Scuba Diving Malta Gozo Comino, a softback book by Peter G Lemon (ISBN: 9780954178925) is a popular guide to use when diving in the Islands


Deco day

Most UK return flights are early-morning, so you may be unable to dive on your final day. If so, I strongly recommend some culture. I took an adventurous seven-and-a-half-hour tour of topside Malta.

The tiny city of Valletta hides many treasures within its limestone walls, and I must have had the most knowledgeable tour-guide on the island, taking me through a history spanning seven millennia.

Malta and Gozo also have three of the world's 1000-plus UNESCO World Heritage Sites a stone's throw from your hotel. I visited one – a prehistoric fertility temple.

Because of its location, 300 days of sunshine a year and low-cost flights, Malta has grown popular with the film industry. *Game of Thrones*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Troy* and *Gladiator* among others have been filmed here in recent years.

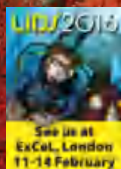
During my tour it was thrilling to hear of the centuries of battles, air sieges and bombings that resulted in many of the shipwrecks for which Malta is famous, despite being separated from other countries by hundreds of miles of sea. 

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TREWAVAS



DREAD OR DEAD

I LOOKED OVER THE SIDE of the RIB into the grey waters outside Bovisand harbour. It's about 12-15m deep here, perfect if you're looking for a spot for your first British sea dive. My trainee is already kitted up and waiting for a buddy-check.

"Is there anything that you're interested in seeing on your first dive?" I ask casually.

"Um, I think I'd better tell you that I have a fear of kelp. I have nightmares about getting tangled up and drowning," she says.

Hmmm. "OK, I'm going to come clean with you," I say. "It's pretty much kelp city down there. The stuff is unavoidable." We're now perched on the side of the RIB, ready to roll. "So – anything else you'd like to see?" I venture.

She pauses briefly. "Actually, I'm also quite scared of fish..."

You really couldn't make it up. In diving, as in life, people seem to dread the strangest things.

Non-divers will often ask: "Aren't you afraid of sharks?" How can we explain that the sight of a shark on a dive is a thing of wonder; it's the scary behaviour of other divers that's most likely to present a danger.

Sea creatures are fascinating, not dreadful. But there are a few exceptions, as I found on a recent dive in Mauritius.

The reef in Mauritius is coming under attack from the destructive crown-of-thorns starfish.

That's right – in an ocean far, far away, there's a powerful, invasive force menacing the marine environment. It's Starfish Wars.

Every time dive-guides there spot one, they have to use their best Jedi dive moves to prise it off the reef in one piece and bring it back to the surface to die.

Wouldn't you just know it, these heavily armoured reef-eaters are a nightmare to kill. Stab them with a knife and the pieces will regenerate into more starfish. Attack of the Clones!

Injecting them with poison seems effective, but who carries a syringe on a dive? Plus you end up leaving poison behind on the reef. True to the Dark Side, it can remain dangerous even when dead.

A crown-of-thorns starfish is not a small creature, and it bristles with hard, sharp spines. It's like a sea urchin on steroids.

The dive-guide is struggling to dislodge it, so I'm using the edge of my camera housing to push beneath the spines and prise it away from the reef. As I try to get my hand under it, the starfish strikes back.

Ouch! Blood is coming out of my punctured finger like a volcano erupting. It's an alien green colour.

It doesn't stick to the side of my finger as it would on land. It plumes straight outwards and mingles into the sea in the same way that a gas disperses into the atmosphere. I'm intrigued – is this what blood would do in space?

The starfish is now clinging to my GoPro and the dive-guide has wrapped an SMB around it to protect me, and to capture any spawn. Being purest evil, the crown-of-thorns will spontaneously attempt to reproduce if it faces anything more than a Phantom Menace.

As we head for the surface, it's a small victory: the destruction of this Death Starfish.

**'I THINK I'D BETTER
TELL YOU THAT
I HAVE A FEAR
OF KELP'**

LOUISE TREWAVAS

STORMY WEATHER



Unseasonable conditions threaten the exciting whale-shark encounter, but what of the even more exciting Blue Hole day-trip? **LISA COLLINS** has been diving in Belize

Above: Nurse-shark feed at Shark Alley.

Right: Boat moored in the shallows above the Blue Hole.

Below: Rainbow parrotfish.

THE RADIO OVERHEARD in a taxi on the way to Miami airport gave the first warning of an unusually early tropical storm heading towards Belize.

As a celebration trip for my daughter, Camilla, who had just passed some major exams, we had planned a two-centre trip to Belize, first to Dangriga for the whale sharks, the second to Ambergris Caye to dive the famous Blue Hole. We hoped to coincide with the whale-shark aggregations that can occur at Gladden Spit about five days after a full moon in April, May and

June. We were to spend five days at Almond Beach Resort and Jaguar Reserve Hotel in Hopkins, near Dangriga, then a week at Ambergris Caye, a small tropical island off the mainland.

Unfortunately the storm grounded us for the first three days. A major football competition was monopolising the few TV stations obtainable, so the wonderful spa at the hotel got our full attention.

The go-ahead to dive was issued on the fourth day. Heading out early, we spent 90 minutes in fairly stormy seas reaching Gladden Spit. There we kitted up on a strongly rocking boat and were glad to jump into the sea.

We descended in the blue to 30m where, with visibility down to 10m, we stuck close to the dive-guide.

Swimming around in very green, soupy

seas, with no reference-point except our guide, was disorientating. Our eyes were strained on stalks as we tried to spot a whale shark.

We would chase after the guide, who would suddenly turn and head in the opposite direction. Shadows appearing on the periphery of our vision, which we were sure were whale sharks, turned out to be nothing more than optical illusions.

AFTER AN HOUR'S surface interval, with sea-sickness raging around the boat, we jumped back into the water, and spent another 40 minutes searching the darkness for any sign of a tail or fin. No luck again.

Back in Hopkins, all the divers on the boat agreed about how pleased they were to be back on dry land.

A new day, another try? Sadly, the



conditions on our final diving day in Hopkins, had not improved, and the dives were cancelled. The whale sharks would have to wait for a return visit.

So it was onwards to Ambergris Caye, a 40-minute flight from Dangriga to Belize City, then a 30-minute flight in a tiny plane across ocean spotted with small, round tropical islands.

The bustling island life of Ambergris seemed a different world from the rainforest-surrounded tiny village of Hopkins. No more green seas – a beautiful clear turquoise gave us a boost on the diver-contentment scale.

Getting around the small cay was easy using petrol-driven golf-carts, hired at a small cost. These seem to be the island's main mode of transport, and even the locals drive them.

The town was a five-minute drive 🚗





from our hotel Victoria House, and with plenty of restaurants and shops it buzzed with life.

We started with a check-dive inside the world's second-largest barrier reef at Hol Chan. There is a channel through which the water rushes in or out, at high or low tide. Boats anchor in a white-sand patch at around 5m, and divers enter the water and swim towards the reef to 12m.

At slack tide the channel is a beautiful dive-site containing a huge variety of fish – horseye jack, snapper of many kinds, barracuda, nurse sharks, huge rainbow parrotfish and goliath and Nassau grouper.

Because of the tropical storm, the dive was still quite surgy and in a fairly strong current. Visibility was good, however, at 15-20m, but improved with the weather so that by the end of the week it was up to 20-25m.

With bright sunlight and blue skies clearly visible through the surface, Hol Chan was quite a contrast to Dangriga.

At the end of the dive in the shallows near the boat, seagrass fronds swayed gently in the slackening surge.

Baby turtles and nurse sharks shared this playground, seemingly oblivious to each other as they snuffled out prey in the soft sand.

After a lovely surface interval spent snorkelling we completed a second dive in a more protected area of Hol Chan, at Shark Ray Alley. A very lazy rainbow parrotfish was lying on the sand by some

soft coral, and it seemed to take a great effort for it even to follow me with its eyes as I photographed it.

At the end of the day, before the dive-boats leave, it is customary to feed the nurse sharks. Each boat-crew hangs a fish-head on a line. The divers get in the water with their masks and snorkels and watch as a maelstrom of nurses, best-known for their sleepy and lazy nature, feed in a frenzy.

Horseye jack dart in and out, trying to steal titbits. Fingers have to be watched, because they're none too fussy.

DIVES OUTSIDE THE barrier reef are generally wall-diving, with beautiful topography, large schools of fish and hunting predators. Pinnacles is one beautiful site, the coral features that provide the name resplendent in colour and teeming with fish-life.

Hol Chan Canyon is another beautiful site with large, sandy-bottomed canyons hiding sting rays and sleeping nurse sharks. Friendly grouper and snapper follow divers around, waiting for the divemasters to catch and kill lionfish, unwelcome visitors to the region in that they kill off endemic species.

Divemasters are encouraged to locate these pests and are rewarded by the authorities for the most killed, all part of the bid to stop them breeding and proliferating in the Caribbean.

We had pre-booked our trip to the Great Blue Hole, one of those sites on



many divers' wish-lists. A perfect circle, this underwater sinkhole 45 miles from the mainland is one of the world's most famous sites.

We were picked up from the Victoria House jetty at 5.30am for the journey out to Lighthouse Reef. The sun rose over a flat-calm sea – the storm had finally abated, leaving us with cornflower-blue skies, clear blue ocean and a relaxing 150-minute ride to the site.

With the weather so good we were able to spot the Blue Hole from a fair distance away. For the last half-hour of the journey excitement mounted as the azure circle surrounded by clear turquoise grew bigger.

We pulled into the small channel that marks the entrance to the hole, and were astounded by this natural phenomenon.

The Blue Hole is not a dive for the faint-hearted. We would drop over the side onto the top of the wall at 5m, then proceed vertically straight down to 42m and the opening of a large cave. We would be able to weave between the stalagmites and stalactites for eight minutes before making our way to the top of the wall for a long safety stop.

There was excitement and apprehension. As we dropped in, gazed into the chasm and then started our descent, grey, Caribbean reef and blacktip reef sharks came from the depths to greet us.

The lack of fish and the sheer sides of the hole added an eeriness to the dive.

We entered the cavern and wound our way through the massive limestone formations, absorbed in the wonder of nature. Far too early, our deco limit reached, we ascended towards the lip of the sinkhole.

Our safety stop was conveniently placed at the top of the wall, under the boat at 5m, so we could swim around freely and look into nooks and crannies, eyeball grouper and watch the reef sharks watching us until our air ran out.

Our next dive was at Half Moon Caye, a lovely easy dive down to 20m, with a sandy slope and very nice coral bommies

teeming with fish. Several green turtles lazily swam over the reef as two eagle rays hovered in the blue.

After a picnic stop on the deserted island Half Moon Caye, our last dive of the day was at Aquarium back on Lighthouse Reef, where rays, turtles and reef sharks joined in on the party.

Sleepy, sated and with huge smiles on our faces as the sun set on the long journey back to Ambergris Caye, we reflected that this had been one of the most memorable and wonderful individual day's diving we had ever experienced.

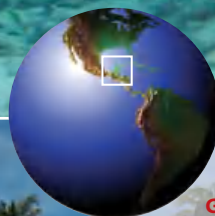


Main image: Baby green turtle in the seagrass at Hol Chan.

Far left, top: Camilla swims through stalactites in the Blue Hole.

Far left, bottom: Porkfish at Hol Chan Channel.

Left: Nurse shark and jack.



FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Lisa travelled to Belize City via Miami with American Airlines, then with Tropic Air from Dangriga to Ambergris Cay and on to Belize City, although there are various flights from major US gateway cities.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Almond Beach Resort and Jaguar Reserve in Hopkins, which offers jungle excursions as well as diving, www.almondbeachbelize.com; Victoria House at Ambergris Caye, www.victoria-house.com

WHEN TO GO ▶ Belize has a dry (high) season Dec-April and a rainy (low) season May-Nov, with heaviest rain June-Sept and hurricane season Aug-Oct. Water temperatures 26-28°. Diving is year-round with vis up to 30m but reduced in the rainy season. Whale-shark season at Gladden Spit is March-June, with most encounters April-May.

MONEY ▶ Belize dollar.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from UK around £800. Almond Beach charges £135 per room per night, and £165pp for a two-tank whale-shark dive. Victoria House has a five-night full-board diving package of £2000 per couple.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.travelbelize.org

St. George's Caye Resort

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HAPPY WITH YOUR RENTAL GEAR?

SOME TIME AGO, I was going on a dive in the Caribbean, with the attractions around the 30-35m mark.

I was young but fairly competent, with more than 100 dives built up in various conditions in the previous couple of years.

I had been looking forward to this dive for at least six months, and had put in quite a bit of training to make sure I was up to it.

When the day came and I boarded the boat, I was surprised by the experience levels of the other divers.

Most were no more than Open Water-certified with a handful of dives under their belts, and some hadn't even been in the water for a few years.

The divemaster sat at the front of the boat, as far from the customers as he could get, smoking a funky-smelling cigarette as the inexperienced divers muddled through preparing their rental equipment.

Regulators that in some cases lacked alternative air sources or contents gauges were fitted to tanks and, when pressurised, began to fizz and hiss as high-pressure air worked its way past frayed O-rings.

The operator with which I had booked at the last minute was clearly atrocious, and the potential for something to go very wrong on the dive was off the scale.

Experienced divers will soon sniff out bogus operators like this, but the passengers on that boat simply didn't know what they didn't know.

SO HOW DO YOU KNOW whether an unfamiliar dive-centre cares about your well-being? Its website may boast that it regards your safety as of paramount importance, but can you believe it?

Tell-tale signs can provide an insight into a centre's true attitude to diver safety, and among these is the condition of its rental equipment. If a centre is prepared to let you use substandard gear, you can bet that won't be the sole cause for concern.

When renting dive equipment, you need to check that it works properly. Easily said, but what exactly are you looking for?

I wouldn't expect you to go through every one of the points made below before walking out of the shop, but understanding the sort of thing that should trigger alarm bells will boost your confidence...

REGULATORS

A complete set of regulators is made up of a number of required components, each of which should function easily as per its design. Under water, regs shouldn't appear to be imitating an Alka Seltzer ad, with bubbles bursting from every orifice.

From the first stage there should be a primary second stage, an alternative air

source (AAS), a low-pressure inflator hose and a contents gauge. Some models incorporate the AAS in the inflator hose but this is rarely found in rental gear – usually it's a standard octopus.

Often reg sets have consoles that may carry a depth gauge or even a computer and/or compass. You do need a computer or depth gauge and timing device, but it's not a requirement to have them all on the console.



You've flown in without your beloved dive-gear to save on airline baggage charges, but is the replacement gear for hire at your destination up to your usual standards? **DREW McARTHUR** is here to help you check

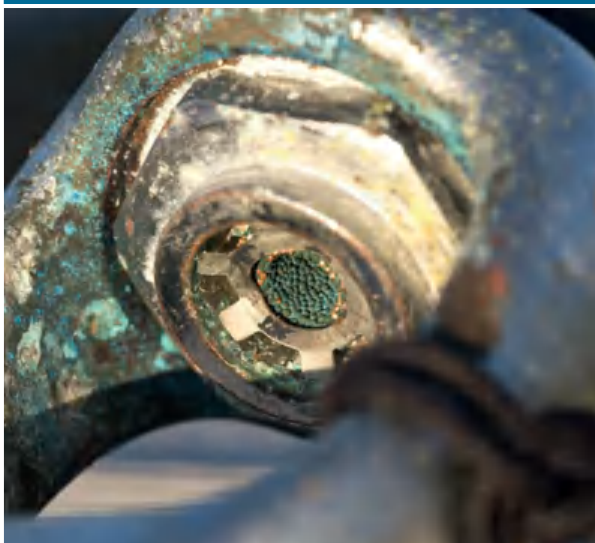


Above: In extreme cases, the teeth grips on a regulator mouthpiece may get bitten off completely, leaving nothing for your mouth to hold on to.

Right: Nervous divers can bite down too hard on mouthpieces, causing them to rip.



Nice and shiny, this is an example of a recently serviced reg.



Note the green corrosion that has built up on the metal. This one definitely needs to take a trip to the service bench.



At a glance the mouthpiece may look fine, but it's a good idea to pull it around a little to make sure.

CHECK:

- mouthpieces to make sure that the teeth grips are intact on both the primary and octopus and that, when stretched a little, no cracks or tears are visible on the outside of the piece.
- hoses for any visible cracking or wear, which is most likely to show at either end, close to the connection.
- metal parts for corrosion – a hard green or white growth. If significant build-up is visible on the exterior there's a good chance of a similar amount inside, obstructing all the little components that make the magic happen. Look at the filter where the first stage connects to the tank: if it looks old and tired, with heavy corrosion, the reg has probably not been serviced recently.
- that the inflator connection is easily operable.
- that there is no water inside the contents gauge.
- that, once connected to a tank and the valve opened to pressurise the regs, the gauge needle rises smoothly and drops back to zero once depressurised.
- that the air comes through nice and easy when you take a breath or two.
- that there are no freeflows. A freeflow can be a steady trickle, most likely from an old pressure seat, or a violent-sounding continual purge.
- that there is no hissing caused by leaking O-rings with the valve open.
- your buddy's gear for bubbles on the dive, and your buddy yours. If the flow is small it's unlikely to be worth thumbing the dive over, but a good operation will be able to fix or replace gear on the boat between dives.

BC

The BC is a relatively uncomplicated piece of gear. Think of it as a bag with doors that let air in or out and that can be attached to a diver.

It may also incorporate integrated weights.

CHECK:

- that the BC holds air by orally inflating it and listening for leaks or, even better, putting it in water and looking for bubbles.
- that when attached to pressurised regs, it inflates when you press the inflate button, and stops inflating as soon as you stop pressing.
- that it is not automatically inflating (if you have time for this). Fully deflate the BC, leave the gear assembled and pressurised for 10 minutes or so, then check for any difference in the volume of air inside.
- that if you push the pinch-clips together then pull at the strap either side of the release, they don't give.
- Velcro for defects. It will be worn and pulled away from the panel to which it should be attached, so is easy to spot.
- that there is a way to attach the octopus second-stage and contents gauge to the BC to prevent dangling.

FINS, SNORKEL & MASK

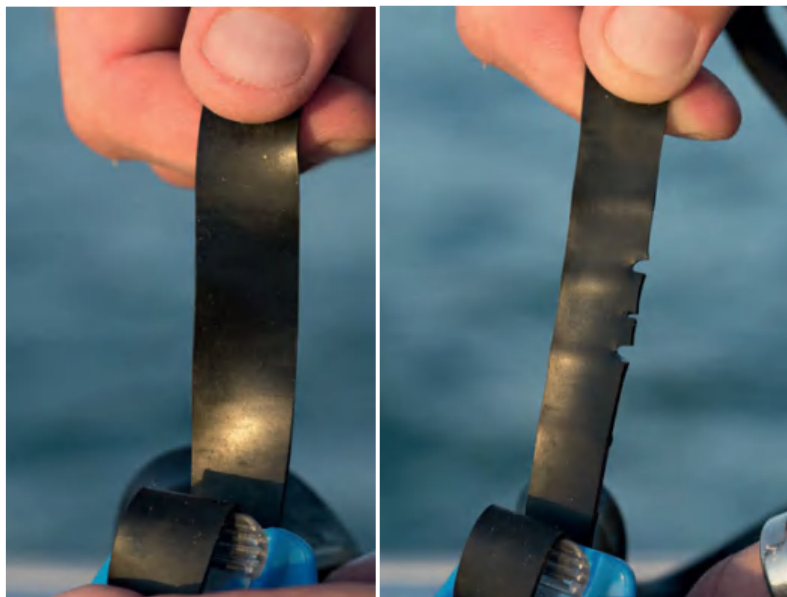
Have you seen divers do a giant stride off the back of the boat, only to realise that they are missing their fins or mask? This has taught me two things: firstly, I shouldn't find such mishaps as funny as I do and, secondly, although masks and fins are not generally regarded as as important as other items of dive-gear, you don't want to dive without them. So they need to be in good working order.

CHECK:

- the comfort of fins when worn. If they rub when tried on in the shop, by the time you're a few minutes into the dive they will hurt, and a few minutes after that it will be agony.
- fin-straps for signs of splitting and the attachment points for any wear.
- that the mask-strap is undamaged and so unlikely to snap under water.
- for any growth inside the mask. A few dark spots are no big deal, but I have seen masks that appear to be



Hoses often show wear close to the connections at either end – the cracks tell us that this one doesn't have much life left in it.



A mask strap may look fine, but when you give it a little pull you can see (above) splits that will eventually cause the strap to snap completely.

- developing their own eco-system.
- that a snorkel mouthpiece is not ripped. If there is an exhaust valve under the mouthpiece, make sure it works properly and won't let water in.
- that the connection that holds the snorkel to the mask is good. Usually the rule is that lost or damaged equipment is paid for by the person who lost or damaged it.

CYLINDERS

Scuba cylinders have a hard life. They get used and abused by people who just want to suck the life out of them and then cast them aside. Tanks need loving too, so if you're renting one you need to ensure that it has been well cared for.

A cylinder should be inspected visually once a year. Among other things, it should be opened up to ensure that there is nothing nasty inside and that it is structurally safe to withstand pressure. Once completed, it should have a vis (visual) sticker attached to it, showing the date the test was completed.

Cylinders also require hydrostatic testing every five years (though this does vary regionally). When one passes its hydro, it should have the date stamped into the body, usually up near the neck, so make sure it's in date.

Before connecting the first stage to the valve, look at the O-ring to make sure it's not worn, frayed or containing sand or grit. Once the reg is attached to the valve and you turn it on, you shouldn't be able to hear any fizzing caused by a bad connection. If you do, ask the crew to help you fix it or switch it.

THERMAL PROTECTION

Rental wetsuits and drysuits can be a mixed bag. Unfortunately they seem to

show wear and tear more than any other items of rental gear.

As people of different shapes and sizes try squeezing into a suit it gets stretched out in various places, making it less efficient at keeping you warm.

BAD SIGNS INCLUDE:

- Holes that should not be there.
- Pee smells.
- Zips that don't work.
- Being too big or too small.

If the conditions in which you're about to dive warrant a wetsuit, they may also require hoods, boots and gloves. Similar guidelines apply.


OWNING YOUR OWN GEAR is a huge benefit and makes your diving adventure way more enjoyable, but not owning or travelling with your own gear shouldn't reduce you to unsafe diving.

Returning to my opening story, luck was on our side that day, as no one got hurt. Everybody made it to the surface and, once back on the boat, the crew made a little show of throwing raw meat into the water to send some sharks into a feeding frenzy.

Nearby another dive-boat had just pulled up and was in the process of putting its divers into the water.

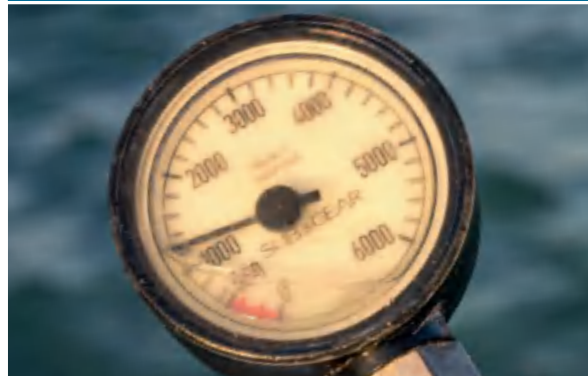
The fact that no one got hurt doesn't mean that the dive was safe and that the whole thing should be repeated the very next day.

You don't have to work through every point in this guide religiously, but don't take rental gear for granted if you have any doubts about a dive-centre.

The difference between the most awesome dive you ever do and the last dive you ever do could come down to three quid's worth of plastic. 



Cylinders should have a visual inspection sticker showing when they were last checked.



This contents gauge has been flooded, and while it will still work, the water inside will eventually cause the unit to fail.



A valve O-ring that is fit for purpose will not show significant signs of wear.



When O-rings in the valve start to wear like this one, it becomes harder to make an airtight seal with the first stage.



FREE EXPRESSION

It isn't just about going up and down a line once you've mastered breath-hold techniques – compliant marine life, caves, wrecks and more can all be enjoyed in a new way. Here three freedivers – one a newcomer to the sport and the others highly experienced – explore some of the possibilities beyond scuba

1: BREATH OF FRESH AIR



Freediving is one of the fastest-growing water sports in the world, but what

makes it so popular? And can anyone do it? **AARON 'BERTIE' GEKOSKI** leaves his regs at home and heads for Indonesia

SOMETHING DOESN'T FEEL right. I'm 20m under the Lombok Strait, holding onto the same breath I took (what feels like) an eternity ago. Without a tank, BC or regs.

As the realisation kicks in, so does the urge to breathe. At first it's a swallow, then contractions in my gut. I shouldn't be down here – well, not without a delicious tank of sweet, sweet air.

It's time to head up, my liaison with the elusive 20m mark all too brief.

I try to remember the instructions: loooooong fin-strokes, relaxed swaying shoulders. In fact, relaxed everything. None of this fluttery frog-kick crap you've been honing all these years.

Just don't look up, whatever you do.

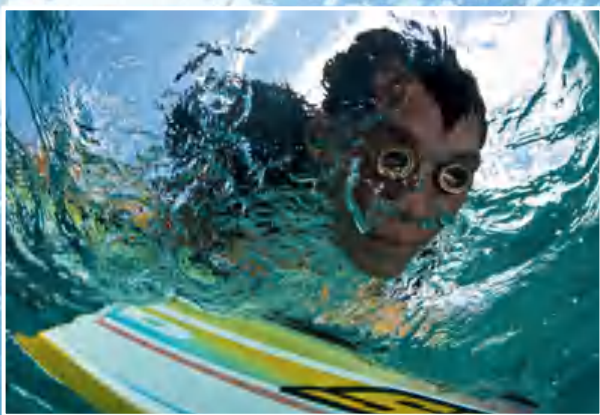
It's a long way to the surface, and peeking makes those darned contractions worse. Eyes on the prize (in this case my instructor Denis, who glides upwards, rolling his shoulders, caressing the water with his elongated fins).

Nearly there, nearly there. And suddenly I'm at the surface again, my safe place. Recovery breaths: fast exhale to purge the CO₂, forceful inhale to flood the body with yummy O₂. And repeat... don't want to black out.

That wasn't so difficult, was it? Can we go down again? I want to go deeper...

The origins of freediving

I'm floating in waters just off the Gili Islands, an archipelago of three small



islands not far from Bali, Indonesia, and I'm participating in a Level 1 SSI freediving course. And I'm not alone – surrounding a group of tethered buoys are four instructors and 10 pupils, who take it in turns to yoyo down lines weighted to different depths.

It's a quizzical scene, and I can't help but ponder what the ancient Greeks, the first known commercial freedivers, would have made of it.

Around 300BC, these oceanic gods would dive to 30m to harvest sponges, and the word "apnea" – which now means diving on one breath of air – comes from the Greek word *a-pnoia*, meaning "without breathing".

However, the Greeks were far from the first to practise freediving. The first accounts date back some 10,000 years to the "Clam Eaters", a group of shellfish-hunters operating in the Baltic Sea.

For thousands of years, freediving has

Above: Bajau freedivers develop their skills from an early age.

Pictured: Freediver with boat visible above.

anyone do that?" Next time I see him, I hope to provide some answers.

It wasn't until 1949 that freediving began life as a sport, when Hungarian fighter-pilot Raimondo Bucher reached 30m on one breath.

In the 1950s a friendly rivalry between Enzo Maiorca and Jacques Mayol increased interest in this new extreme sport. Their exploits led to the 1988 film *The Big Blue*, perhaps the most famous freediving feature of all time.

Fast-forward 60 years, and the sport is unrecognisable. Thousands of people compete in events all over the world, regularly finning down beyond 100m.

Freediving has become cool, it's popularity fuelled by social media, with French freediver Guillaume Nery's slick videos receiving millions of hits.

Why the hype?

"Every year we have seen an increase in the number of people learning to freedive, and we're certifying more instructors," says Michael Board, founder of Freedive Gili.

Board has set 13

British freediving records, his most notable achievement being a Constant Weight plunge to 103m in 2014, using a fin to swim down and straight back up again.

He set up Freedive Gili in 2009 as the first dedicated freediving centre in Indonesia. In only six years, eight other centres have cropped up around Bali and the Gili Islands. And I'm keen to find out why.

"Imagine being able to take a deep breath and dive down under water, experiencing weightlessness and the sensation of flying, without any discomfort or urge to breathe, and combine this with an almost meditative feeling from being totally focused and present in your mind," says Board.

There are numerous reasons why people learn freediving. For some it's a pursuit of inner peace, or to feel a greater connection with the ocean. For others it's about pushing one's body to the limits,

setting goals, beating personal bests and witnessing improvements (much like a marathon runner).

And more and more people – often scuba-divers – want to have better, bubble-free interactions with marine life, minus the bulky equipment.

My reasons to take the course fall more into the latter group. As an underwater photographer, some of the best photo opportunities, particularly with cetaceans, are to be had while snorkelling.

Breath-hold divers have a huge advantage over floaters, and will inevitably take better pictures. So after a couple of months of procrastinating, I book a ticket from my home in Borneo and head to Gili Trawangan.

I arrive grumpily into Gili Trawangan after a cramped, sweaty boat-ride from Bali, packed with what appears to be the entire cast of *The Only Way is Essex*.

Gili T reminds me of a small-scale Koh Tao, the island in Thailand where the young and frisky learn to dive by day and drink by night.

On the main beachside strip, bars, restaurants and dive-schools are sardined together, punctuated by horses – many with ribs protruding from their chests – that drag along cartfuls of tourists. Zen it most definitely isn't.

Freedive Gili T

Luckily Freedive Gili is set back just enough from the main strip to block out most of the din. "Freediving is 95% mental, 5% physical," says instructor Denis on our first morning. Lean and with a serious demeanour, Denis exudes calm from every yogi pore.

We begin with some relaxation techniques, including a "body scan", a meditation technique that trains the mind to observe bodily sensations and release any tension.

A poor yogi, I lack focus and am unable to release pain from a recently stubbed toe. Perhaps a session on freediving breathing techniques will help. The key, says Denis, is to breathe with the belly, which slows down the heart rate.

After a couple of minutes we're taught how to take our three final breaths: inhale to fill the stomach, then chest, then release the chest, followed by

been practised by fishing communities around the globe. Recently I spent time documenting a nomadic seafaring group, the Bajau Laut, as part of an online series I've been presenting, *Borneo From Below*.

These "sea gypsies" spend almost their entire lives on the ocean, and their eyes can focus under water in ways we can barely comprehend.

As children, many burst their eardrums to facilitate a life of freediving to extreme depths for minutes on end.

For the Bajau and other fishing communities, freediving is about survival. When I put it to one Bajau man, Minayak, that people do this as a sport, he laughs and says simply: "Why would



the stomach with the exhale. Deep. Slow. Calm. After these, a freediver would begin a descent.

Next up, equalisation. For the purposes of Level 1, we're taught the pinched-nose Valsalva technique. This comes naturally to the scuba-divers in our group.

The Frenzel technique – achieved by using the tongue as a piston to force air upwards – is often employed when diving deeper than 30m. It requires less oxygen.

We move to the pool for a confined session and to learn proper freediving form. The body should be straight and streamlined, with the chin tucked in so that you look directly at the line, arms by

Above: Entering a swim-through.

Right: A group of experienced freedivers and students.

Below: Aaron descends along the line.



the side, long fin-strokes, fluid movements, relaxed shoulders.

I have trouble with the unfamiliar finning technique, and continuously face-plant into the pool-floor.

I hope it comes more naturally out in the open ocean, where we head after all the students manage to swim 30m under water in the pool. Here we take it in turns to progress up and down buoys to complete different tasks.

To pass this stage of the course, we must complete two exercises at 10m: firstly ascending using arms only, and then repeating this but after removing our masks.

Our group completes these exercises with little difficulty, and by the end of the day I already feel improvements in my form, breath-hold and ability to relax.

Mammalian reflex

Our second and final day starts with a lesson in freediving physiology. This includes learning about the mammalian diving reflex – the natural reaction mammals experience when they're submerged in water.

This response puts the body into oxygen-saving mode so that we can spend more time under water.

We also learn about shallow-water blackout and how to avoid it. This loss of consciousness – experienced normally at

the surface or in the top 10m – is caused by cerebral hypoxia, when oxygen stores fall below the level required to maintain consciousness.

Denis is keen to stress that, despite its label as an extreme sport and the recent high-profile death of the world's most decorated freediver, Natalia Molchanova, it is incredibly safe when practised with a competent buddy.

Even if freedivers black out in the shallows, it rarely leads to complications when dealt with in the correct manner.

Rescue & duck

Next step is to learn how to deal with an unconscious diver in the ocean, following a yoga session and some techniques to stretch the diaphragm.

At 10m we have to lead a blacked-out Denis safely to the surface and then practise rescue breaths. We're also shown proper duck-diving techniques.

The drill goes: breathe up, three final breaths, take snorkel out, pre-equalise, put arms straight out for a 90° angle, lift the hips so that the legs follow the body's downward momentum, followed by one stroke with the arms, constant equalisation, then finning.

Once we've practised this a few times, the rope is lowered to 15m, and then to 20m, a symbolic mark that instantly induces unwanted tension.





Phreatic as a bird, instructor
MARCUS GREATWOOD extends his
 fascination with freediving in overhead
 environments to explorations while
 on holiday in Greece

KEFALONIA IS THE LARGEST of the Ionian Islands, but it has escaped mass tourism. After a season of “phreatic” diving (that is, freediving in underground lakes) we were looking for a last-minute holiday in the sun, and just off the west coast of Greece, with a typical rocky coastline and crystal water, Kefalonia seemed the perfect late-summer destination.

Apnea equipment was packed as a matter of course, and we called into the local scuba centre to hire some weights. Aquatic World is a friendly shop on the island’s east coast, and its staff provided us with some lead and pointed out a few dive-sites. In passing they mentioned the ban on diving in Mellissani Cave Lake.

Cue humorous double-take: “Is there any way we can dive this amazing place?”

“Not without permission – diving is forbidden.”

The next two days of “exploring” the island just happened to follow the route of Mellissani Cave Lake, the local police department and municipality offices, culminating in a meeting with the Mayor of Kefalonia.

Luckily, he was a jovial chap who was tickled by the idea that we might want to freedive his cold underground lake. So, after taking a couple of selfies with us, he agreed to swap some photos of us in the lake for his permission to dive.

The absence of mass tourism was evident in the small unmarked car-park and tent-like structure housing the café, souvenir shop and entrance gate of Mellissani Cave Lake. The staff also

seemed amused about our diving plans when we sampled the tourist-boat trip around the cave lake. Then we jumped in.

The seawater in the lake is sucked from the Ionian Sea into sinkholes on the west side of the island, near Argotoli, and expelled into the Bay of Sami.

The brackish water takes two weeks to travel across the island in huge karst conduits (phreatic tunnels).

In several places these have collapsed to form cenotes, pits resulting from the collapse of limestone bedrock that exposes groundwater underneath, similar to those in Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula.

In water the colour of Frank Sinatra’s eyes, the weights appear a long way away. Twenty metres is approaching a deep dive on scuba. I manage to relax just enough to flirt with the bottom of the line. And it feels great.

Sadly, this spells the end of our session, and we head back to the centre for the token exam. My appetite for freediving has been sufficiently whetted. It’s been an absorbing couple of days learning the techniques needed to dive deeper, for longer. Now all that’s required is a little practice... right, where are those whales?

★ To learn more, or participate in a freediving course, visit www.freedivegili.com. You can watch Aaron’s diving adventures in Borneo on the weekly online series at www.borneofrombelow.com

Right, top and below: Alaties beach on Kefalonia was the place for spectacular rocky dives and sea caves.

Below: It all starts from the diaphragm – yoga breathing class in the Gili islands.





The roof of the Mellissani cave collapsed during the 1953 Ionian earthquake, after which a tunnel was cut for an entrance. Local guides paddle tourists around both sections of the lake, one open to the sunlight and the other dark and mysterious, despite the incandescent floodlight flickering behind a mound of fallen roof rubble.

The cold water forms a permanent mist, imparting a damp chill to the air, but the crystal turquoise of the water almost takes your breath away. We were itching to dive it.

The coldness

The 10-minute boat-trip gave us ample opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the cave before finally getting our chance to explore. Wearing wetsuits we climbed into the lake, and got our first real impression – one of coldness.



Above: Huge speleothems line the huge main chamber at Mellissani.

Right: Exploring the sea caves at Alaties beach.

Below: *Pinna nobilis*, the giant mussel, was once a common sight but is now protected because of illegal poaching.

Bottom: At Zervati woodland leads down to crystal-blue waters, eerily like a Mexican cenote.



UK caves are cold, and subterranean lakes are something we're used to, but the shock of dropping from bright sunshine and T-shirt-and-shorts weather straight into 14°C water took our breath away, as did the colour, size and beauty of Mellissani cave.

The chamber is huge, dropping quickly off to 30m with water so clear that diving feels like flying. Cave-divers have surveyed the entry and exit tunnels on either side of the lake (these overhead environments are unsafe for freediving), but we were in awe of the splendour of the main chamber.

Huge speleothems (stalactites and stalagmites) have been left from the time when the cave was dry, thought to be thousands of years ago.

Surprisingly, considering the amount of sunlight falling on the open section, there is very little life in the water. Eels, however, seem to thrive there, and are not afraid of divers.

The cold eventually stopped our fun after about an hour – but what an unforgettable hour it was!

We were told that the water from Mellissani lake flows into the sea via a lake in Karavomilos. So we went to find it, and were greeted by a duck-pond.

Very clear, teeming with life – but a duck-pond nonetheless.

Human activity is forbidden in the lake because it supports a unique eco-system. However, we were given permission to swim through to investigate a small crack in the surrounding rock.



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The lake was amazing, with life springing forth in every direction, but we weren't permitted to hang around to film.

The crack turned out to be the entrance to an amazing cave system, the first two chambers accessible to us surface-dwellers. Fun doesn't cover it. This was the best phreatic dive we have done.

Armed with a Light-for-Me 4XPG torch and 3XML video light, we had plenty of illumination for exploring and taking photos. The water was stunningly clear (and still cold) and we were in no danger of losing visibility in the strong exiting current.

I must warn people thinking of entering this cave that, apart from the entrance being a nature reserve, some

Above: Karavomilos –the cave beyond the forbidden duckpond.

ceilings were unstable, with a lot of tablature breakdown.

We had heard that as many as five of the 17 caves in the area contained lakes, with various degrees of accessibility or suitability for swimming, but it was water all the same.

The coldness

Not ones for sitting on the beach, we decided to do some cave-hunting. Agalaki is a vertical-access cave that's easy to locate and awe-inspiring to view, but without our Petzl caving kit we weren't about to risk entering. Next time!

On our last day we located the gem in the Kefalonian cave list. Zervati, eerily like a Mexican cenote with jungle leading

down to the by-now-expected crystal-blue waters, was a joy unto itself. By far the smallest lake, it drops quickly to 10m, leading to a tunnel not destined for apnea exploration.

Again our compact travel lighting was perfect for the 30-minute dive. We spent a relaxed 40 minutes enjoying the view, water and location.

I have always believed that wherever you find yourself in the world there is amazing beauty just around the corner – you just have to look. Phreatic diving is just an extension of this philosophy, albeit with a few more safety procedures.

✳ *NoTanx is now running phreatic diving courses in the UK, www.notanx.com*

3: HARMONY IN THE RED SEA



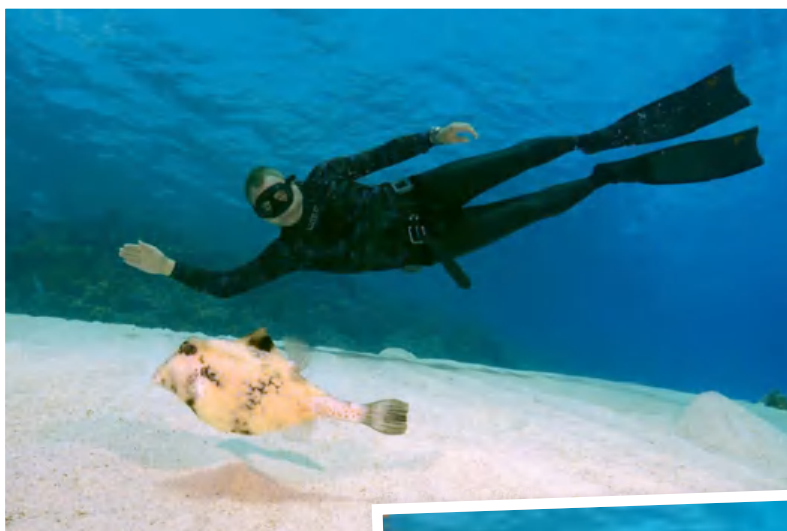
Last year **HELENA BRENER** and her team of Odessa freedivers formed part of a mixed band of Ukrainians and Russians, freedivers and scoobies, with classic Red Sea wrecks in their sights. Photos by **ANDREY NEKRASOV**

OUR UNDERWATER ODESSA gang was in Egypt, spending a week on a cosy dive-boat named *Brina* that contained a cool mixture of 10 divers and freedivers from both Ukraine and Russia.

Despite these being uneasy political

times *Brina* soon became a haven of international harmony, an amazingly friendly, cheerful and empathetic atmosphere prevailing. The heads of both groups were successfully managing the complicated task of ensuring the safety of both scuba- and freedivers.





We were brought together by the Red Sea all around and beneath us... endlessly blue, its transparency dangled before us and attracted us.

In fact the Odessa team had been in Dahab a couple of days earlier than the others to warm up before the trip. Hospitable Dahab had hugged us as usual, and two days spent at its famed dive-sites had helped us to tune up our minds and bodies for freediving.

Transition period

After a long time out of deep water, a freediver always needs time for mental and physical re-adjustment, to remember how to switch the diving reflex on. Eel Garden's transparent water, dazzling white sand and actual garden eels, which it's possible to watch quite closely while breath-hold diving, served that purpose.

A great turtle suddenly surfaced from nowhere to take a breath of air along with one of our team. Then slowly, with regal dignity, it went deep along the reef, inducing in us that satisfying sensation of complicity.

Freediving is a unique sport in which a participant's psychological condition, calmness, confidence and ability to relax count for more in achieving one's goals



Clockwise from left: Descending the line; flagging down a boxfish on the seabed at Dahab; looking through a porthole on the *Thistlegorm*; two shots of divers on the wreck of the *Giannis D*; enjoying the coral at Dahab,



than physical shape or lung capacity. There are no age restrictions – pro freedivers range from the under-20s to the over-50s.

Our safari trip itinerary included wreck-sites we love to visit. One of the most vivid Red Sea wrecks is the Greek ship *Giannis D*, built in 1969 and sunk in 1983 after crashing into the submerged reef at Abu Nuhas.

The crew was rescued but the ship has become a scenic wreck, broken in three and lying at 27m.

The rough sea was not helping us to relax but our curiosity and unsatisfied diving addiction soon overcame this. It helped that the wreck is near the surface – you can get to the deck-house at 10m and approach other parts at 5-6m.

And relax

Little by little we would warm up and make it to the bottom, but first we had to achieve that

basic freediving condition of relaxation.

So we lay on the surface holding onto the buoys, calming down our breathing after all the hassle of fixing ropes and buoys, and tried to let ourselves become a part of the sea.

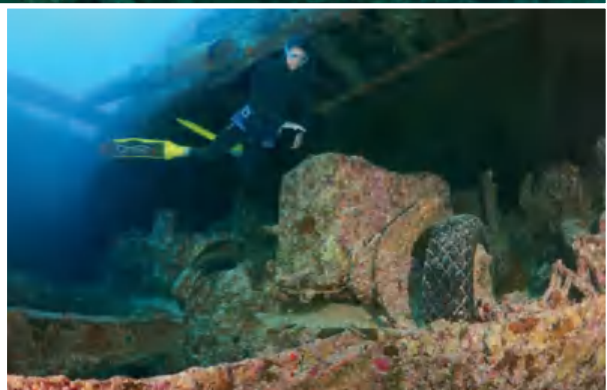
We meditated on the wreck, which we could see clearly below us – and then the first diver went down, slowly flying along the gangways, taking a look into the upper structure, disappearing for some time and then suddenly coming back into sight and finning back up to the buoy.

The next diver turned around the mast, entered the deck-house, glanced inside some huge pipe sticking out of nowhere and swam along picturesque coral-covered plates.

Dive by dive we explored the whole ship, and left with great memories of a beautiful wreck still full of life. Scuba-divers love historic or mysterious sites but freedivers just need places that are calm and deep.







We will never forget the sun breaking through the calm warm water on our easy reef dives, which removed all worries and sometimes even physical pain.

We'll always remember with a smile the eyes, rounded in astonishment, of our RIB captains, two Bedouin boys of about 18. They couldn't believe that we needed all these long ropes to freedive, because they had always assumed that nobody could dive that deep without scuba.

It's impossible to go up and down a rope all the time in the Red Sea. Both physically and psychologically breath-hold diving is a great challenge, serious work, and sometimes you just want to fool around in the water, enjoying the beauty and variety of the reefs.

You race across the sea holding onto a scooter, keeping pace with blue fusiliers and meeting the gaze of an awesome great moray sitting in a big crack 15m below.

Thistlegorm freedom

Travelling the northern route, you can't miss out on the *Thistlegorm*. This British military cargo ship was sunk by the Luftwaffe in 1941, having made only three

full voyages in its short battling life.

Her bursting boiler led to detonation of most of the ammunition on board and a massive fire. Nine crewmen died and 30 were rescued by a convoy ship.

Thistlegorm cracked in half and lay on the sand in 30m until the wreckage was found by Jacques Cousteau in 1955. Full of intact WW2 artefacts, it would become Egypt's and one of the world's most visited underwater objects.

Experienced scuba-divers know that conditions are rarely calm at the *Thistlegorm* site – in such a wild spot there is always a wave, big or small.

So we had to be careful of the weather, manoeuvring all the time in a bid to hide from the wind, which was unusually strong for the season. Scuba-divers don't have to worry so much about surface conditions, but freedivers spend a lot of their diving time lying on a buoy and meditating to prepare themselves.

Waves and currents are unhelpful – just when you think you're ready for your relaxed and beautiful dive, you may suddenly realise that you also feel sick from rolling about. It's not a good idea to freedive if you feel like that.

The waves were pretty high when we reached *Thistlegorm* – conditions were difficult even for the scuba-divers.

I rarely suffer from seasickness, but this time I didn't feel happy, and the idea of getting back on the boat kept returning.

In these conditions the 25m depth seemed extreme, and we had to hold onto the rope all the way down to resist the strong underwater current, but some of us did manage to overcome these complications, and even enjoyed the wreck and the underwater photoshoot.

Incredible feelings lap over you as you reach the upper deck, hover above the old rolling stock and tanks standing on both sides, and slowly fin down to the hold.

Here at 23m there is no current, no rolling – just absolute calm and silence.

Those freedivers who managed to get



over the first very uncomfortable 15m were able to relax and glance inside the ship. At first you just stare into the darkness and, because your eyes are not used to the light levels, you catch nothing more than a pile of metal.


But after some seconds you can discern the stacked motorcycles and vehicles that have been parked there for the past 74 years. You feel privileged to be within touching distance of these wartime relics.

Our luck held as we avoided touching an invisible but huge stonefish that looked as if it had grown out of the stern.

Time soon passes

Briefings, daily dives at site after site, nightly parties, sunbathing on deck, all that rolling about at the surface, reefs and wrecks, deck jumps into bioluminescent night waters – the week went fast.

After arriving home, some of the more sensitive freedivers would still be seesawing for a couple of days – that's how our vestibular apparatus readjusts to the normal rhythm of life on land, and reminds us that it's time to return to our families, work and life.

But getting together on winter's nights, we will recall hospitable Egypt with gratitude and (flights permitting) plan to return there again... and again. 

Above: Exploring the *Thistlegorm*.

Above right and below: Using DPVs to cover more ground on a single breath.





Mistral



Red Sea | Wrecks & Reefs

Whirlwind



Red Sea | Wrecks & Reefs

Cyclone

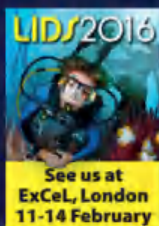


Red Sea | Get Wrecked

Hurricane



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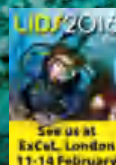


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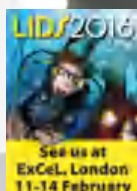


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SAFARI DIVING Lanzarote

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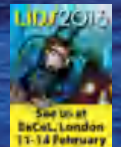
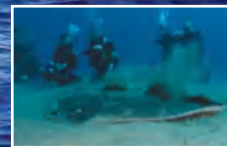
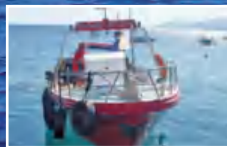
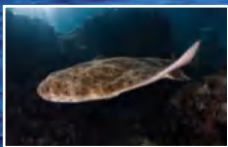
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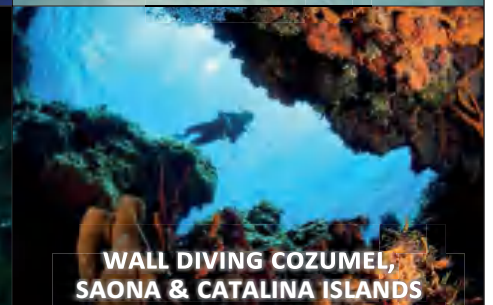
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BE WHERE ALL THE PRE-DIVING ACTION is this February – be at London's ExCeL Centre. If you and your friends and family enjoy not only diving but outdoor activities in general, you're in for a big treat.

The **London International Dive Show (LIDS)**, owned and organised by the **DIVER** Group, is back at ExCeL, but with a whole new look.

Now the event stretches over four days, from Thursday 11 to Sunday 14, and becomes a full part of the huge festival of outdoor activity to which visitors flock at ExCeL every year.

Your ticket provides admission not only to LIDS but to Europe's biggest sport & leisure event – the **Telegraph Outdoor Adventure & Travel Show (TOATS)**, the **London Bike Show** and the **Triathlon Show**.

The combined event with its multiple attractions for active people is expected to

attract more than 60,000 visitors.

But don't worry, if you're a regular Dive Show goer you'll find plenty of underwater content to keep you bubbling away happily for the day.

As usual there will be an exciting rolling programme of interesting audi-visual presentations from well-known divers. The same applies with the **Get Started in Scuba** programme, designed to cater for all those Show visitors who may be new to the sport. And of course the **Try-Dive Pool** is ready and waiting for them if they can't wait to move things on a stage further!

What never changes is that LIDS provides a great opportunity to size up practical diving holiday possibilities for the coming year, to examine and perhaps buy new kit ready for the coming season, and to link up with old friends as well as making some new ones.

You'll find LIDS close to ExCeL's west entrance and fully integrated into the event. The extra days offer flexibility in timing your visit.

If you have time to spare on a weekday, the shows will be in full swing from 1pm until late (8pm) on Thursday and 10-5 on Friday, and run

from 9-6 on Saturday and 9-5 on Sunday.

As the various events and presentations roll out over the four days changes may occur, so visitors are requested to keep an eye on the latest news and timings at diveshow.co.uk, and at telegraphoutdoorshow.co.uk for all those non-diving attractions (see below)...



THE JOY OF DIVING PLUS – ALL THIS!

You're going to need to make time to experience even a smattering of all the attractions around the hall.

So here's a taste of what to expect: the **Superbloc Climbing**

Wall, Discovery and **Climb & Adventure Stage** presentations with big-name speakers, **Expeditions That Changed the World** and **Outdoor Photographer**

of the Year exhibitions, **Wild Britain Bushcraft & Survival Zone**, **Outdoor Photography Photobox**, **Cycling Performance Theatre**, **Air to the Throne** freestyle mountain-bike demos and competition, **Surrey Human Performance Training Hub** for one-to-one assessments, **Bikes Etc 500m** and **Kids' Test Tracks**, **Street Velodrome**, **Extreme Action Sports Tour**, **Triathlon Expert Theatre** and **Event Village**, swim-coaching, wetsuit-testing and a wide range of themed bars and cafes. Phew!

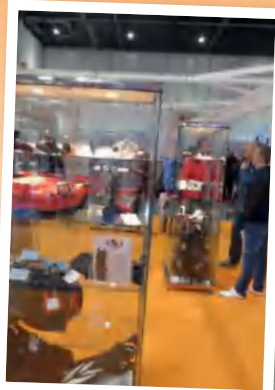
Why not go along with non-diving friends – turn them on to scuba and let them show you why they think triathlon, competitive cycling or mountain-climbing is so great.

Your only problem will be deciding what to do next!



SHOP WINDOW

Hot to shop? Start at the new-look **New Product Showcase** for an overview of the latest dive gear to be found on the many manufacturer, distributor and retail stands at the Show



TRAIN TIME

Training will be big at LIDS but it's far from just entry-level. If you're looking to boost your diving skills in 2016, be sure to drop into the **PADI Village**, and check out club-based and other agencies, including **BSAC**.



BEST OF BRITISH

We're hoping for a bumper year for home-waters diving and the **British Isles Experience** is there to help you network with dive-centres and boat-operators who can connect you with the choicest sites. Sponsor **Suunto** will also be there, giving away more state-of-the-art dive-computers.



WORLD VIEW

Exhibitors on many stands, such as those in the **Caribbean Village**, will be standing by to waft you away to exotic waters should you so wish – just say the word (and pass the credit card!).

They can offer expert advice but there will also be stage presentations on many of these destinations – as well as on new dive products.



THE FUN STARTS HERE...

Here are 10 of the hot-spots and attractions to look out for around LIDS

POOL WORK & PLAY

The **Try-Dive Pool** will be seeing a lot of people splashing in for their first taste of bottled air. The facility is there for anyone aged 10 and over and provides the ideal opportunity to experience



safe and inspiring intro to scuba. Their lives may never be the same again!

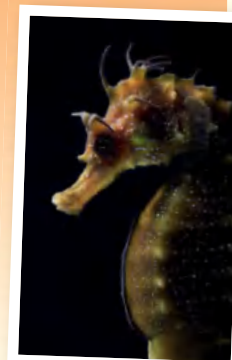
PHOTO FINISHING...

The **PhotoZone** is the place to be if you're a keen underwater photographer or aspire to be one. You can draw on expert advice on all aspects of stills and movie-making, either one-to-one or at the talks and clinics taking place on the **DIVER Stage** and **Ocean Theatre**.



... PICTURE PERFECT

LIDS also plays host to the 2016 **Underwater Photographer of the Year London** contest. Based on the Brighton event launched by **DIVER** half a century ago, last year's event drew 2500 entries! See the dazzling entries on display, attend the awards ceremony and enjoy the post-event analysis.



SERVICE REWARDED

It isn't only photographers blushing accepting awards on the **DIVER Stage** at LIDS – so too will be the winners of the 2015 **DIVER Awards**, respected dive industry figures who received the most votes from you, our readers, for services well rendered. Come along to find out who lifts the Oscars of the diving world.



STAGED SEMINARS

From time to time exhibitors will be able to expound on their wares in more detail in the **Ocean Theatre**, so watch out for audio-visual presentations about diving destinations you might

be thinking of visiting, or new products or services that could benefit your diving.

FREE FOR ALL

You're invited to take part in basic relaxation and breathing technique sessions with the highly experienced **NoTanx** freedive crew during LIDS. They're hourly, they're free, and they can help to improve a scuba-divers' gas consumption – or set you off on a whole new learning curve.





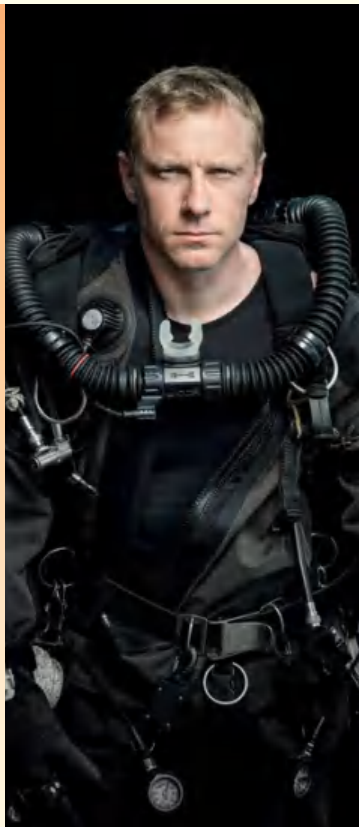
SPEAKING OF DIVING...

Here are just a dozen of the divers you'll find speaking over the four days of LIDS on the DIVER Stage and in the Ocean Theatre. Check times at www.diveshows.co.uk or on noticeboards near the stages and the main entrance.

ANDY TORBET FEAR, RISK & DIVING / SNORKELLING IN BRITAIN

Andy's time as a paratrooper, diver and bomb-disposal officer in the Army allowed him to hone his risk-assessment and stress-management techniques. Risks included blowing up, and things could get a little stressful. Applying these skills to cave- and deep-diving projects, he argues that fear is good – and risk may not be what we think. Andy looks at how to make a seemingly insane project safe, and how he deals with fear and anxiety.

But not all Andy's talks concern high-adrenaline diving, and everyone including newcomers will be enthused when he covers those satisfying UK in-water experiences available to those armed with little more than a mask and a snorkel.



MARK POWELL TRAINING DOESN'T WORK

All agencies and instructors insist that they produce safe divers, so why do we see so many with poor skills and little or no understanding of basic diving concepts? asks Mark. He argues that such dangerous mismatches start with instructor-training that fails to cover the essentials – and that instructors teach the wrong thing in the wrong way. Whether you're an instructor looking to improve your teaching skills or a diver wanting to know how to spot a suitable instructor, be sure to catch this one.



JANE MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE FLOW

Scapa Flow is among the best dive destinations, and Jane Morgan is among the best underwater photographers, so the two make for a dream combination. Jane may be best-known for her macro work but she also loves wrecks, and at LIDS she plans to discuss how she got to grips with photographing some of those iconic examples to be found in the Orkneys.



JACK INGLE KIT CONFIGURATION

Jack's back and by popular demand – for many years his kit configuration workshops were synonymous with the Dive Shows and, frankly, we've missed them. Now he will be at LIDS, triangles of access and all, to sort out those nagging doubts and concerns and make us all more comfortable and efficient divers.



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NIGEL WADE & SAEED RASHID DIGITAL CLINIC

Ace photographers Saeed and Nigel are back once again to discuss photo and processing topics and answer your questions in free-ranging forums. Look out for special guests each day.



PAUL COLLEY OCEANS TO CHALK STREAMS

Paul has been translating his experiences of photography for the conservation of our oceans into something that impacts closer to home. Working recently with the Blue Marine Foundation in the South Atlantic and Fauna & Flora International in Cambodia has inspired this underwater photographer to see if his images could help in the conservation of UK chalk streams.

His simple hand-drawn and home-built designs for remote-control underwater cameras led to an impressive portfolio of new UK images that appeared on the BBC and in national newspapers.

ALEX MUSTARD UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR

The Underwater Photographer of the Year (UPY) competition is the brainchild of photography guru Alex Mustard, and on Saturday he reveals the winners and presents the prizes. Their and other outstanding images will be on display, and on Sunday he will use them as a starting point to discuss what it takes to produce a winning shot, and what he and his fellow-judges looked for. Thinking of entering this or any other photo competition? Then don't miss this treasury of helpful advice.



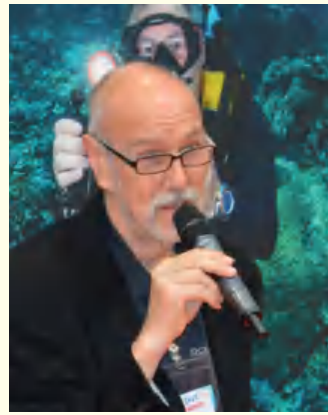
MARCUS GREATWOOD WHAT FREEDIVING CAN DO FOR YOU

The multiple world-record freediving coach offers awareness, relaxation and efficiency in movement to everyone from scuba-divers to triathletes, and we divers may also find our bubble-blowing sporting prowess improved as a result. Marcus also fronts practical sessions on how to start freediving for anyone seeking a quick but safe way into apnea.



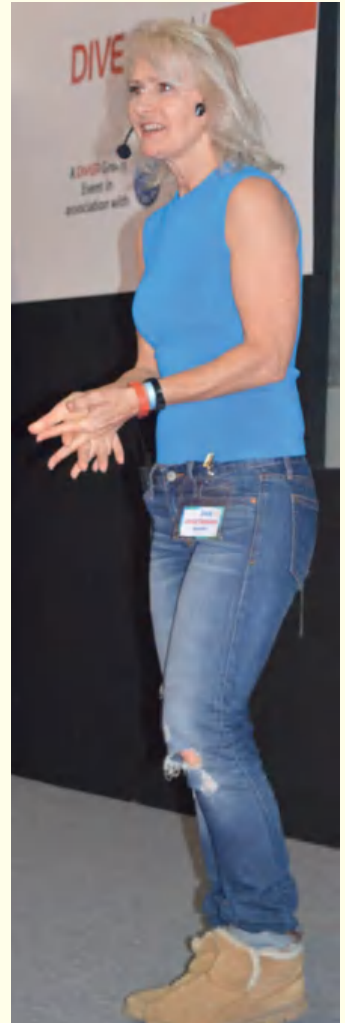
DAVID JONES CORON WRECKS / PLASTIC OCEANS

Coron Bay, Palawan in the Philippines has many diving attractions but chief among them are the wrecks of the Japanese supply fleet sunk in 1944. David Jones has dived these vessels and has a great tale to tell. He has also been a prime mover in the fight to prevent plastics pollution in the oceans, and will discuss the successes and the challenges ahead.



JOHN BANTIN SHARK-FEEDING: RIGHT OR WRONG?

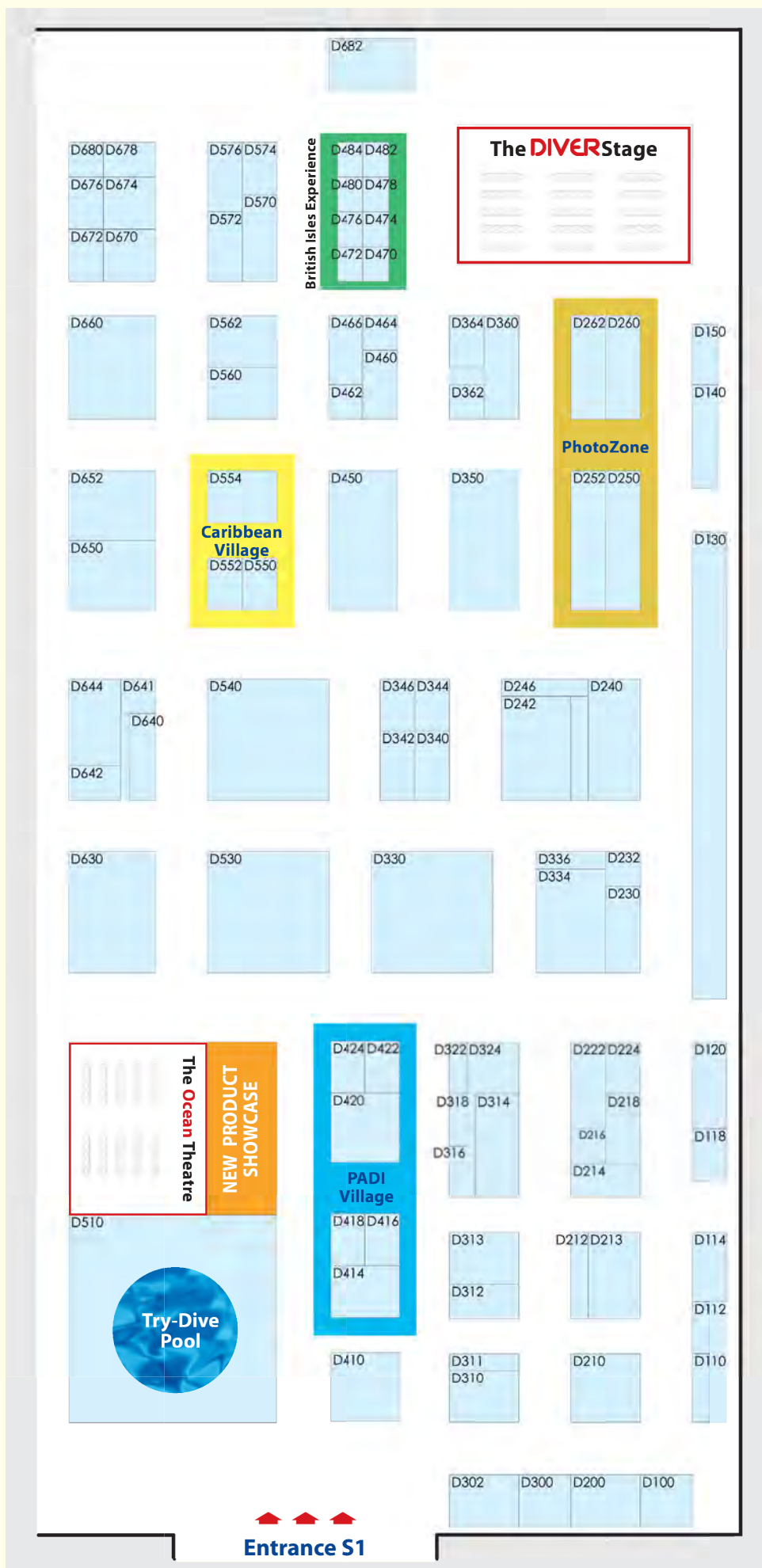
The question of shark-feeding is guaranteed to divide, annoy, delight and confuse divers in equal measure. John Bantin has had more first-hand experience of sharks and shark-feeding than most and his views are always trenchant – but will you agree with him?



LOUISE TREWAVAS ALL-TIME TOP 10 DIVING MISTAKES

For years divers have followed Louise's underwater adventures in the pages of DIVER. She has vast experience and is a keen observer of diver behaviour, so who better to draw up a hit-list of great diving cock-ups? She also draws conclusions about how, when things do go wrong, we can survive the experience.

FLOORPLAN & LIST OF EXHIBITORS



4th Element Diving	D340
AP Diving	D540
Andark Diving & Watersports	D130
AquaMarine Diving – Bali	D641
AquaMarine Silver	D362
Atlanta Designs	D311
Billy Shiel/Farne Islands Diving	D484
blue o two	D312
British Freediving Association	D218
British Society of Underwater Photographers – BSoUP	TBA
British Sub-Aqua Club	D410
Central Compressor Consultants Ltd	D562
Coral Cay Conservation	D232
Costa Brava Diving Centers Association	D112
CPS/ TUSA	D314
DAN Europe (Divers Alert Network Europe)	D242
Deep Blue Diving Fuerteventura	D150
Dirty Divers	D240
Dive Safari Asia	D212
Dive Worldwide	D324
DIVER Magazine	TBA
Diverse Travel	D140
Divesangha Ltd	D222
Diving Torches	D462
Dominican Republic Tourist Board	D550
Dressel Divers	D336
Exposure Marine	D224
Falcon Diving Charters	D470
Galapagos Sky/Solmar V	D346
Health & Safety Executive	D460
Instituto de Turismo de la Región de Murcia	D360
KLJ Travel Ltd	D110
Lanzarote Dive Centre	D322
Lochaline Boat Charters	D480
London School of Diving – Try Dive Pool	D414
Manta Trust	D230
Marine Conservation Society	D213
Maritime Archaeology Trust	D212
NoTanx Apnea	TBA
Northern Diver	D660
ORCA	D464
Philippines Department of Tourism Pro Dive International – Mexico & Dominican Republic	D330
Regaldive	D316
RNLI	D310
Robin Hood Watersports	D642
Royal National Lifeboat Institution	D530
Royal Navy Reserve	D630
Safari Diving SL	D313
Scuba Strapp	D640
Scuba Travel Worldwide Holidays	D364
Scuba Trust	D246
Sea Shepherd UK	D466
Sea-Zones Boat Charter (Newhaven)	D652
Thresher Cove	D472
Underwater World Publications	D560
Underwaterworld at Stoney Cove	TBA
Wakatobi Dive Resort	D450
Waterhoppers Diving School	D644
Woodland Trust	D318
Working for Wildlife t/a RSPB	D214
	D344

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THE LIDS 2016 GRAND DRAW prize provides a great chance for a Show visitor and chosen companion to sample the highly rated diving off the coast of Jordan.

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divers and snorkellers of all abilities, and for underwater photographers. There are noted wrecks to explore too, such as the *Cedar Pride*.

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At the weekend (Saturday 13, Sunday 14) an

adult ticket costs £18, under-16s £4 and under-eights go free. A family ticket for two adults and up to three children costs £40.

You can book online at www.diveshows.co.uk



SIMON PRIDMORE identifies procedures followed by technical divers that every diver should consider applying to his or her own diving



5 THINGS TEC DIVERS DO (THAT ALL DIVERS SHOULD DO)

FAR FROM BEING the mythical daredevils of diving legend, technical divers are actually thoughtful, careful individuals who are attentive to detail and constantly looking for new ideas to improve the way they dive.

Above: Divers discuss configurations.

Below: A tight regulator set-up.



Over the past 25 years the technical community has proven to be a crucible of creativity from which several equipment and procedural innovations have emerged that have had an enormous impact on the sport.

These include nitrox and, more recently, sidemount diving.

There are a number of techniques that technical divers use that have not yet passed into the mainstream but that could be of enormous benefit to the wider community of divers.

Here are five things technical divers do that we should all be doing.

1: CONFIGURATION

Technical divers constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the purpose of the equipment they carry with them under water, and the way they put it together.

Among other things, they make sure that everything has a function to perform on the specific dive they are planning, each item is secured and easily

accessible and that they have more than one of any piece of equipment that is absolutely essential for the safe conclusion of the dive, so that, if one is lost, they have another to replace it.

They check that their equipment is balanced, and as streamlined as possible. They also make sure that, when they are in a swimming position, nothing is hanging down below them, where it might catch on a reef or wreck and break off.

If you have been diving for some time and your equipment is currently set up exactly as it was when you learned to dive, a review may be well overdue. I will discuss configuration in much more detail in the next article in this series.

2: THE WHAT-IFS

Most diving accidents are caused by an event that was predictable: an event that could have been avoided or handled comfortably had the diver anticipated it and planned and practised what to do if



Left: How to calculate your air consumption - swim for 10 minutes at 10m.

Below: Using a reel and line as an ascent platform.

and when it happened.

This is the basic premise behind a process that technical divers refer to as “Assessing The What-Ifs”.

They look at all the things that could go wrong on a dive, and formulate a plan to combat each eventuality. They make sure they have all the knowledge, skills and back-up equipment they need to deal with it.

Then they practise the correct response until it becomes instinctive. In the corporate world, this would be called a risk-management action plan.

This was actually the concept behind the skills that you learned in your early diver training. Your instructors weren't just harassing you for their own entertainment when they made you remove and replace your mask or scuba gear. They were teaching you what to do if your mask-strap ever broke, or if your cylinder ever slipped out of the BC cam-band.

3: AIR CONSUMPTION CALCULATION

The way to calculate how much air you breathe is something that everyone would find useful when they start diving, but it is rarely taught.

A technical diver knows his surface breathing rate as well as he knows his blood group, but few mainstream sport-divers are aware of this vital statistic. Non-divers might find this unusual!

Once you know your surface breathing rate, you can easily calculate before a dive how much air you are likely to breathe during a given time at a given depth, and can relate that to the volume of air in your cylinder.

This knowledge helps you plan the

dive, alleviates stress and gives you confidence.

It's a simple thing to do. Descend to a depth of 10m and record your cylinder pressure on a slate. Swim normally at 10m for 10 minutes, then stop and record your new cylinder pressure.

Let's say you have used up 33 bar of air during your swim and you're using a standard 11-litre (Luxfer S080) scuba cylinder, which has a water volume of 10.6 litres. A pressure of 1 bar in this cylinder equates to 10.6 litres.

That means you have used $33 \times 10.6 =$ (approx) 350 litres in 10 minutes, which equals 35 litres per minute.

You were at a depth of 10m, where there is an ambient pressure of 2 atmospheres absolute (ata), so if you had been swimming at the surface (at an ambient pressure of 1 ata) you would have used half as much air, that is $35 / 2 = 17.5$ litres per minute.

This is your surface breathing rate, and you can use this to calculate how much air you will use on any dive.

For instance, if you dive at a depth of 20m (3 ata) you will use $3 \times 17.5 = 52.5$ litres per minute.

So, on a dive for 30 minutes at 20m you will use $30 \times 52.5 = 1575$ litres of air.

1575 litres in a standard 11-litre cylinder equates to a pressure of 149 bar, $(1575 / 10.6)$

So, if you start the dive with a pressure of 200 bar and use 149 bar in 30 minutes at 20m, you will have 51 bar left at that point, and it will be time to think about coming up.

Isn't that useful knowledge to have in the back of your mind?

It's a good idea to repeat the exercise a number of times and take an average.

Also, do the drill once or twice while swimming fast and breathing hard. You

will see what a huge impact this has on your breathing rate and therefore on the amount of time your cylinder will last: again, good to know.

4: REELS & LINES

Technical divers will carry a reel and line on every dive. If using a reel is an integral part of the dive-plan, such as when entering a wreck, cavern or cave, they will carry at least two.

Deploying a reel requires a little tuition and a great deal of practice, as line in water can take on a life of its own and can seem wilfully to conspire against you.

However, perseverance carries the reward of being armed with a tool that you can use in a variety of situations.

For example, your reel can help you find your way back and forth from the shotline to a dive-site in poor visibility. It can allow you to raise a delayed submersible marker buoy from depth to act as an emergency ascent platform. Or you can use it to tie yourself to a bouncing shotline and float free.

5: ASCENTS

In recreational no-decompression-stop diving, the majority of any planning that occurs usually revolves around the “bottom” portion of the dive.

It is understandable therefore that divers tend to get into the habit of switching off once they begin their ascent, and focus their attention instead on the tea and biscuits waiting for them on shore. This is a tendency that



ANDREY BIZUKIN

instructors have to work hard to change when they initiate sport-divers into the technical world.

In technical diving, the marker of a successful dive is a safe ascent and decompression rather than the accomplishment of any specific mission. If you didn't achieve all your aims on a dive, you can always try again later. A failed ascent could be life-threatening.

As with the "What Ifs", this is a question of mindset. Recreational divers may not have the decompression burden that technical divers have, but planning a slow, controlled ascent is conducive to a successful dive, no matter what the parameters are.

After all, in scuba-diving going down and staying down are not the difficult bits – a brick can do that! Coming up again is the part that requires skill.

Technical divers always ascend slowly, even at the beginning of their ascent, and make a series of short stops before the decompression stops required by their computer or dive-table.

In the dive industry, we know from experience that the sort of tropical reef-dive profile that I describe below works very well, producing an extremely low incidence of decompression sickness.

At the beginning, you descend slowly



Read more from Simon Pridmore in *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver* and *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*, both available on Amazon in a variety of formats

ANDREY BEZUKIN

to the deepest planned depth of the dive and start swimming along.

You ascend a few metres to an intermediate level when your computer shows 10 minutes or so no-deco time remaining, so you don't have to worry about getting close to the limit.

Now you have plenty of no-decompression minutes to play with. Stay around this new level until the no-decompression time remaining drops to around 10 minutes again, then ascend to a shallower depth. Repeat as necessary.

As your air supply falls below 70 bar or so, move up shallower than 9m and spend the last part of the dive watching the action near the top of the wall.

Finally, when time is up, your air runs low or you are ready for a surface break, you ascend to 5m, do your safety stop, then make slowly for the surface.

Much of this dive is, in fact, a slow controlled ascent. Assuming that you have smooth conditions and plenty of air to breathe you can create a similar, albeit briefer, profile when you ascend from a dive with no shallow section, such as a mid-ocean shipwreck, by starting your ascent when you still have plenty of air left, and pausing for a few minutes at a couple of intermediate depths as you come up.

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AWAY FROM THE GRIND



Divers may have been put off visiting the Faroe Islands by tales of its regular slaughter of pilot whales, but journalist **JO CAIRD** wanted to experience this north Atlantic outpost and make up her own mind. Photos by **STEVE PRETTY**

IT WAS ONLY THAT EVENING, when I was sitting in the comfort of Gepetto, a small restaurant in downtown Klaksvík, that I understood why Janus Joensen of Faroe Dive had been so keen to take us to Viðareiði.

The first dive of our visit to this windswept North Sea archipelago had been an underwhelming and exhausting experience, but the first taste of the dish in front of me, made with the enormous blue mussels that Janus had gathered

that morning, made it all worth it.

I tucked in with gusto, the richness of the mussels cooked in butter, cream and herbs and cheese restoring my strength after a day diving in one of the most remote coldwater destinations in Europe.

Pretty much anywhere you go in the Faroes feels wild and lonesome – it was rare to see more than a handful of people at once anywhere on the islands, including the capital, Torshavn, and

Pictured: Diver in kelp at Elduvík.

there's something about the treeless landscape and steely grey skies that lends the place an air of bleakness I've rarely felt anywhere else.

Viðareiði, however, is in a league of its own, the most northerly settlement in the archipelago, a tiny village at the end of a narrow road that carves through mountain tunnels and crosses an ancient fjord.

Janus had picked me and my photographer buddy up from our

Klaksvík hotel after breakfast that morning, driving to the dive centre for a planning session before setting off to Viðareiði on the island of Viðoy.

Twenty breathtaking, hair-raising minutes later, we pulled up in a deserted village overlooking a mist-enshrouded bay, the stark magnificence of Mount Villingdalsfjall – all 844m of it – towering above us.

The gorgeousness of the location was soon forgotten, however, as we began the task of getting our gear from the car-park to the shoreline, down 300m of slippery sloping rock covered with seaweed, barnacles and the occasional rusting iron remnant of a long-gone jetty.

The entry into the 8° water was, thankfully, simple, but what should have been an easy and enjoyable 40 minutes on a lively wall at a depth of around 8-10m was marred by unexpectedly poor visibility.

Huge green raindrop-shaped blobs of blooming algae were suspended in the water all around us, obscuring my view of everything but the bull kelp waving in the gentle swell. With my face right up to the wall I spotted leafy red kelp crawling with tiny spidery crabs, and the long, pink, stripy tentacles of seastars wriggling between cracks in the rock.

Fingernail-sized, heart-shaped pink barnacles grew on the kelp in little

clumps, while their larger cousins, the mussels Janus was gathering for our supper, lay out of sight among the holdfasts at the base of the wall.

On the exhausting walk back up to the car – a heavy bag of mussels only adding to the load – Janus was full of apologies for the vis. He had never seen Viðareiði like that, he said, reporting that only a couple of days previously the water there had been crystal-clear.

We drank some hot coffee from the flask Janus had brought with him and put it all down to experience – you can't win them all.

OUR AFTERNOON EXCURSION was considerably more successful. The plan was to head to Kallur, at the northern tip of Kalsoy island, to dive at a site called Klaksvík. First, however, Janus wanted to take us snorkelling through an impressive cave nearby, at the foot of a tall sea-cliff topped by a lighthouse.

Janus doesn't keep a boat – there's not enough demand for it, he says, even though his is the only dive centre on the 18 islands that make up the Faroes. So this hugely experienced and personable divemaster sticks to shore-diving for the most part, working with various local skippers as and when boat-dives are requested, and the unpredictable weather



Above: Diver enters the water at Gjogv.

prevailing halfway between Norway and Iceland is good enough to make a go of it.

(He also trains the legions of commercial divers who work at the fish-farms, but that's another story.)

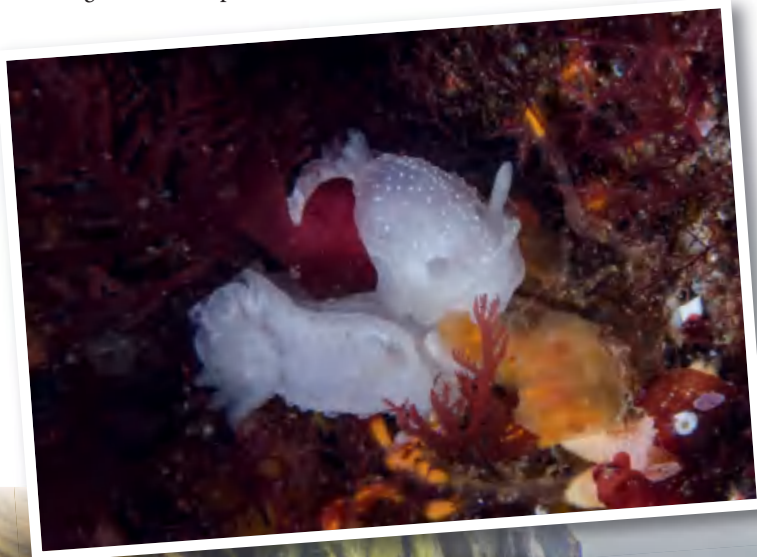
The craft we found waiting for us at the jetty in Klaksvík was not your classic dive-boat. It was co-owned by a group of local guys who use it for weekend fishing trips – as well as for the *grind*, the traditional slaughter of long-finned pilot whales practised here since these islands were settled by the Norse people in the 10th century.

It's a complex and emotive issue, and one that Janus and our skipper were happy to talk to me about as we made our way out of Klaksvík, past huge commercial salmon farms, the highest sea-cliffs in Europe, and flocks of clownish puffins, flying ineptly just above the waves.

While critics of the *grind* denounce it as a brutal abuse of animal rights, unjustifiable in this age of economic prosperity and readily available protein, defenders cite its importance in Faroese culinary and social history, as well as its role in community cohesion.

Left: Two bright white nudibranchs.

Below: Snorkelling at the mouth of the cave at Klaksvík.





While I don't think I'll ever get over my squeamishness at the idea of eating whale meat (a hypocritical position, I should add, given that I eat both meat and fish, hunted and farmed), I came home erring on the side of respecting the *grind* as an expression of Faroese cultural heritage.

If the whales were endangered, or the hunt took place for sport rather than sustenance, that would be another matter – but with the situation as it stands, I'm not going to condemn a practice that brings communities together and dates back 1000 years.

THE BOAT JOURNEY to Kallur took an hour, but so stark and beautiful was the landscape – the island of Kalsoy on one side, the island of Kunoy on the other, all steep grazing land and jagged peaks – that I wished it had been longer.

The screech of kittiwakes in our ears, we suited up for snorkelling and rolled in off the high side of the fishing-boat.

Passing beneath the colony of kittiwakes and into the mouth of the cathedral-like cave, we let the current whisk us into the darkness and out again into the light on the other side of the headland, careful not to stray too close to the entrance of another tunnel that cuts at least 300m straight into the rock.

There was nothing much to see under

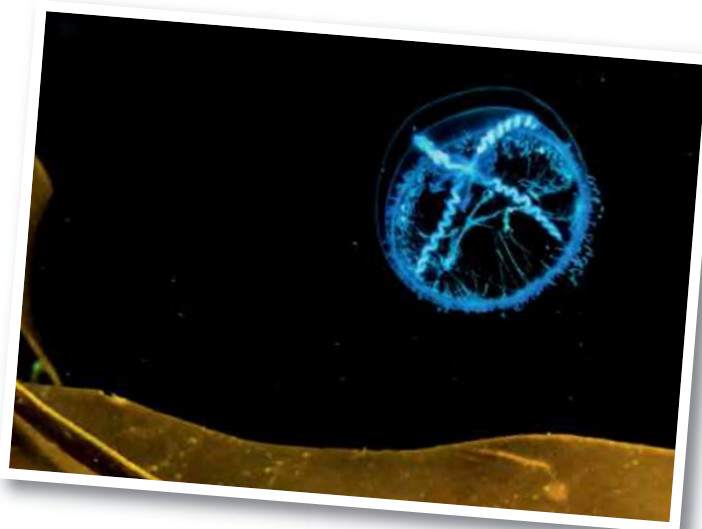
The slaughter isn't commercial – the meat and blubber is divided up between the people who take part and those living in the bay where the *grindadráp*, or killing, occurs – and it all happens by serendipity rather than design.

A *grindadráp* takes place only when a pod of whales happens to be passing, you see. At the time of my visit, the Klaksvík community hadn't taken part in a whale slaughter for going on two years.

Furthermore, long-finned pilot whales are not endangered and the harvest, averaging out at 850 per year, is "sustainable", according to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.

THE FAROESE SAY THAT THE WHALES are killed quickly once they have been driven up onto the beach, their spinal cords and associated major blood vessels severed by trained, government-licensed individuals using knives specially designed for the purpose.

It looks brutal, they say, because of the way that the whale-blood stains the water, but is actually not much different to other forms of hunting or fishing.



Above: A tiny jellyfish the size of a fingernail drifts above some kelp.

Below: Kelp drifts below the cliffs of Gjogv.

the water – but what we got at the surface was a truly exhilarating ride.

We were the first people ever to snorkel through the cave, and I would jump at the chance to do it again.

By the time we got back to the boat, which had sailed around to meet us, it was already 7pm, too late to fit in the dive Janus had planned if we wanted to make it home for dinner.

The sky was still as light as it had been all afternoon, but we opted to trust our stomachs rather than our eyes, and called it a day. Tasting the mussels at Gepetto a little while later, I knew we'd made the right decision.

ANOTHER DAY, another spectacular drive, this time to Elduvík, a tiny village on Eysturoy, one of the larger islands in the archipelago.

I was nervous about another shore-dive following our experience the previous day, but the entry couldn't have been easier: a short boat-ramp with a hand-rail to secure against slipperiness.

We stayed shallow, making our way slowly out into the bay through a thick forest of bull kelp at a depth of no more than 2m before heading down to explore at around 6m. Taking advantage of excellent visibility, I alternated between



looking for macro stuff among the holdfasts on the seabed and coming up above the level of the kelp to get my bearings and check on the whereabouts of my buddy, his bubbles the only clue to his location.

Tiny white seastars and white and yellow molluscs covered the bull kelp, while hermit crabs scuttled among the red leafy kelp growing closer to the seabed.

I spotted delicate-looking Faroese nudibranchs too, vivid against the red of the kelp and the smears of bright pink lichen-like marine life on the basalt of the sea-floor.

With the sun lighting up the remarkably blue water of the bay, it was easy to lose myself in this macro paradise, interrupted only by the sudden arrival of a shoal of several hundred coley moving quickly through the water at the end of the dive.

AS THE CROW FLIES, it's under three miles from Elduvík to Gjogv, the site of our final dive in the Faroes, but the drive around the fjord took us nearly an hour.

Unlike almost everywhere else we'd been that week, the village was busy with tourists when we arrived in the car park to set up our gear at the top of a jetty descending steeply into a deep gorge in the rock.

It was 8pm when we entered the water, but I would have sworn it was mid-afternoon, so warm and bright was the sunshine at this dramatic location.

I fanned out over dozens of species of kelp, from pink stuff that resembled the



Top: Exiting the cave at Klaksvík with the cliffs towering above.

Right: Elduvík.



tulle on a child's ballerina outfit to an iridescent blue and purple variety shaped like cactus leaves, all of it so bright and pretty that you'd be forgiven for thinking you were diving on a coral reef in tropical water.

I hit the southern wall of the gorge a

few minutes later and followed it deeper, marvelling at how the overhangs and cracks in the rock take exactly the same form as those on the wall above the water.


Crabs – tiny red ones, huge grey ones and plenty of species in between – went about their business, dodging a rash of tiny anemones along the way.

The vis suddenly worsened at around 10m down, but not enough for me to miss an orange Atlantic octopus sitting calmly on the sandy seabed. I stayed with it for a long time, watching as it gradually moved off to hide under a rock, all its tentacles tucked under its body at if attempting to attract as little attention as possible.

The octopus hidden from view, I headed to shore, delighted to get another glimpse of that beautiful kelp garden on the way.

It was a long way back up to the village from down in the gorge, but the combination of the spectacular surroundings and Janus's passion and expertise made it all worth it.

The diving, I thought to myself as I huffed and puffed up a concrete boat ramp and 60 steep steps, is very enjoyable – no doubt about that. But diving in the Faroes is about more than just bubbles and bottom time: it's about the mood of this remote archipelago, the awesome landscapes, the welcoming spirit of Janus and his team, and the chance to see places that so few others have visited.

I'll be going back as soon as I can. 

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Atlantic Airways (www.atlantic.fo) flies from Edinburgh to Vágur twice a week, or twice-daily from Copenhagen (SAS offers connecting flights from Heathrow, www.flysas.com). Hertz and Avis hire cars once there but regular, inexpensive bus and ferry travel around the islands is available (www.ssl.fo).

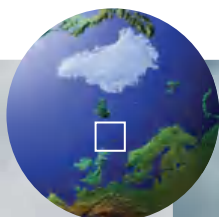
DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Faroe Dive, www.faroedive.fo. Hotel Klaksvík is a short walk from the dive centre, www.hotelklaksvik.fo

WHEN TO GO ▶ Faroe Dive operates all year round. Visibility is at its best in autumn and winter, but the weather is most predictable in spring and summertime.

MONEY ▶ Faroese *kroner*, but Danish *kroner* widely accepted (it doesn't work the other way around, though Danish banks will exchange your Faroese currency for free). Credit cards accepted almost everywhere.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from London from £250. Faroe Dive offers transfers from the capital, Torshavn, for £50. Hotel Klaksvík charges £100 per night for a double room including breakfast (two sharing). A day with two guided shore dives including full gear hire and transfers from Faroe Dive costs from £150. Chartering a boat costs an additional £200 a day.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.visitfaroeislands.com

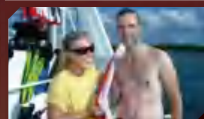
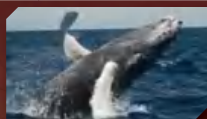


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THE QUEST FOR JAPAPIGU



British marine biologist, underwater photographer and writer

RICHARD SMITH has carried out pioneering research on the biology and conservation of pygmy seahorses, leading to the first PhD on these enigmatic fish, but he knew that his latest quarry would be found only in Japan

Pictured: Japanese pygmy seahorses measure less than 2.5cm from the snout to the tip of the tail.

JAPANESE WATERS ARE PERHAPS better known for spawning *sushi*, tsunamis and Godzilla than for their rich diversity of marine creatures.

The country spans a huge latitudinal range, from the tropical south where coral reefs dominate, into the almost sub-Arctic north.

As a result, its biological diversity is great, with many different habitats accommodating a wide array of species.

Japan's diving isn't especially accessible for foreigners, but it's well worth the effort.

I decided to visit a couple of the better-known spots, as well as visiting some places foreigners rarely, if ever, I was

searching for a very special quarry.

Japan had been on my dive bucket-list for many years, and when Okinawa was announced as the location for the quadrennial Indo-Pacific Fish Biologists Conference, I jumped at the chance to attend.

I was ostensibly in Japan to present some of my pygmy seahorse research at the conference, but my actual goal was to find the elusive and undescribed Japanese pygmy seahorse.

There are hardly any images of these tiny fish and, like much of Japan's marine life, it is barely known outside the country.

After months of online research (thank

heavens for Google Translate) and detective work I narrowed my search to a couple of locations. Having spent years studying pygmies, I knew that finding these miniature fish wouldn't be easy.

I had managed to fit in a few dives in Okinawa, but because it is closer to the Philippines than Tokyo it is heavily dominated by widespread tropical reef creatures rather than by endemic Japanese species.

My research indicated that the Japanese pygmy, or *japapigu* as it is known locally, isn't found this far south. So after the conference I was keen to explore parts of Japan where fewer international tourists visit and the



indigenous species are more apparent, and headed northwards to cooler climes.

That so many marine creatures in Japan are found nowhere else is down to local oceanographic conditions. The South Pacific Ocean gyre (large system of rotating ocean currents) pushes water in a counter-clockwise motion to become the East Australian Current (the one that carried Nemo from the Great Barrier Reef down to Sydney).

Similarly the North Pacific gyre, as the Kuroshio Current, pushes water from the Equator northwards to Japan. This is the Pacific's largest current. It has a significant impact on marine eco-systems, taking warm water and tropical fish where you might not expect them.

This northerly flow also creates a barrier to fish trying to migrate south, effectively isolating them in Japanese waters, much like the giant tortoises, marine iguanas and Darwin's finches of the Galapagos. In isolation, they have evolved into unique forms.

AFTER A FEW DAYS IN TOKYO I met Shingo of Kiki Diving Club. We drove south for three hours to the Izu peninsula. After clearing the urban sprawl the lush

Above: Shihō's seahorse is a Japanese endemic – Richard found it off the west coast of the Izu Peninsula.

Above right: In Japan the boxer is known as the cheerleader crab. Both names refer to its habit of attaching tiny anemones to the pincers and waving them to deter predators.

Right: This painted frogfish was one of nine seen one day off Arari.

Below: Dragon morays reach 1m in length and are relatively common off Izu and Hachijo.

forests of Izu were a welcome relief.

Through Shingo, I had arranged a little tour of the sites around the peninsula, starting at Arari on the west coast. Like many of Izu's sites, this was an unusual example of temperate muck-diving.

We tend to think of this as an exclusively tropical pursuit in locations such as Lembeh, Anilao and Milne Bay, but some cooler-water sites can be equally rewarding.

Over three dives at Arari I saw nine different frogfish of several species, amazing blennies, many dragon morays plus an array of other Japanese specialties. Despite appearing to have perfect environmental conditions there was no sign of the *japapigu*, but I did see a couple of endemic Shihō's seahorses adorned with beautiful filamentous appendages.

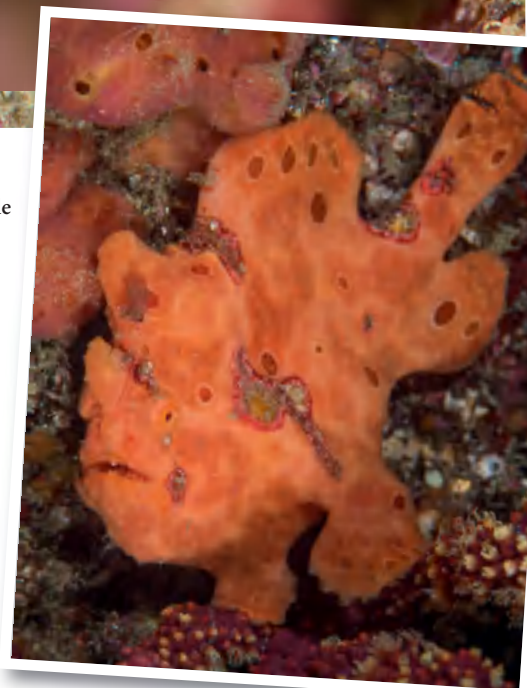
The next day we headed north along Izu's west coast to Osezaki, where views of Mount Fuji dominate the landscape. This is one of the area's most popular sites and receives hundreds of visitors from Tokyo at weekends, so it's worth visiting during the week if possible.

One of the attractive features of Osezaki is the very sheltered bay that allows diving even when rough weather renders the rest of the peninsula undivable. Outside the bay we had some equally great dives.

Nutrient-rich cool upwellings, at around 19°C when I was there, bathe the area and encourage plankton growth and green water, which at first looked quite uninviting.

However, once down to around 25m an eerie forest of whip corals emerged and a thermocline brought with it clear water.

Here, an unusual assemblage of fish including Japanese cherry anthias, striped anthias and goldribbon soapfish were all first-time encounters for me, because they usually prefer much deeper water.



THE FINAL STOP ON MY Izu safari was also its best-known. Izu Oceanic Park (IOP) on the peninsula's east coast is a long-established marine-protected area well set up for divers.

To cope with the weekend hordes, everything is run with outstanding Japanese efficiency. There are designated exit and entry routes from shore, a small mirror to check for hair in your mask, and even a shelf for leaving your glasses!

There are well-kept showers, toilets, a hot *onsen* bath, camera dunk-tanks, large areas for gear preparation and relaxing classical music played as you gear up. It was all very surreal, but very Japanese.

The small on-site shop has regularly updated maps with the location of animals in the area. We went from one rock to another to see the current resident seahorses, frogfish and tube blennies.

But despite having been recorded from the IOP, Japanese pygmies were nowhere to be seen. The shop staff had seen none for a while, so after a week exploring Izu my eggs were all now in the proverbial basket of Hachijo Island, my next stop.





Above: It is just possible to make out stretch marks on this male Japanese pygmy seahorse – he has recently brooded a clutch of young.

Left: A yellow pygmy goby guards the opening of a discarded wine bottle at Osezaki. Inside, the fish's partner tends to a clutch of eggs glued to the internal surface.

Right: Found only around Hachijo and nearby islands, the wrought-iron butterflyfish is a stunning Japanese endemic.

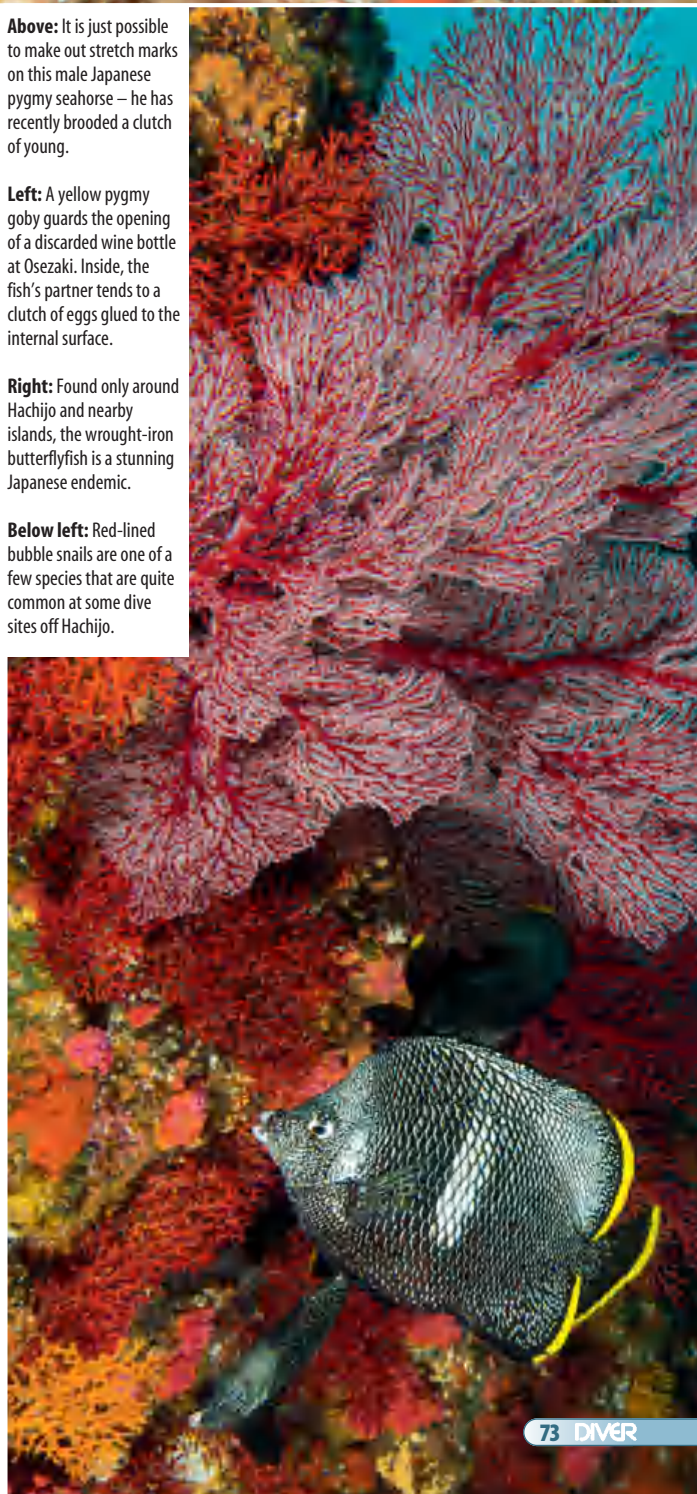
Below left: Red-lined bubble snails are one of a few species that are quite common at some dive sites off Hachijo.

I made the 40-minute flight from Tokyo to the island, 200 miles due south. The sub-tropical waters, heavily influenced by the Kuroshio Current, boast a plethora of rare and indigenous species, but I was getting nervous about my pygmy search.

Luckily I had the eagle eyes of Tanaka-san and Ogino-san from Concolor Diving with me. Within 10 minutes of the first dive they had found a pair of pygmies on the side of a huge algae-covered boulder at about 11m depth.

They were quite large for pygmies, around 2cm long, but resembled Pontoh's and Severn's in habit. Like these two scientifically named seahorses, the Japanese pygmy is also free-living, but has a unique reticulated pattern over the body that distinguishes it from other members of the group.

I went on to find more than a dozen individuals over the coming week, always in the same kind of habitat. They were in fact one of the easiest free-living pygmies to find, because they protruded slightly



from the side of the smooth boulders.

There are many shore dives around Hachijo, but whenever possible we dived the Nazumado site, which is generally possible only in summer.

Tanaka, the owner of Concolor, is passionate about the diversity of the small island's marine life. There was a well-stocked library but I learned as much from speaking to him.

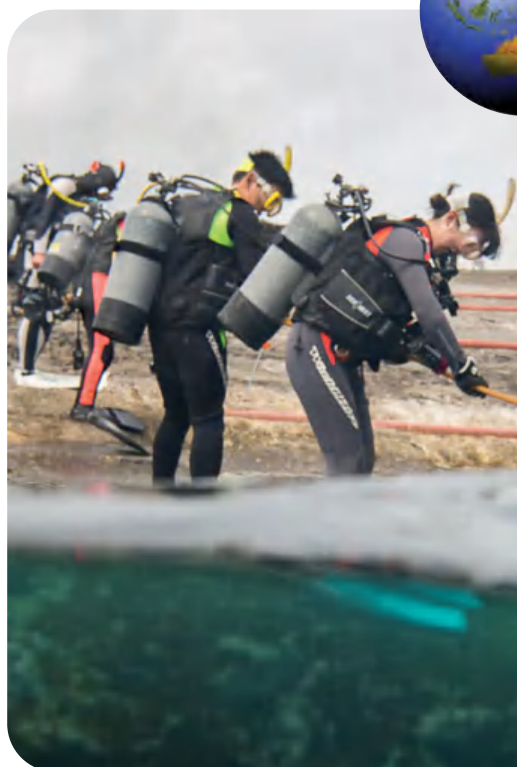
Besides the pygmy seahorse, Tanaka showed me the beautiful wrought-iron butterflyfish, found only around a few of Japan's offshore islands and especially abundant around Hachijo.

SEVERAL UNEXPECTED discoveries included a pair of harlequin shrimp, several boxer crabs, bubble snails and a small school of beastly looking striped boarfish in a large cave at 20m.

I saw none myself, but the deeper areas are frequented by thresher and hammerhead sharks, offering an alternative to the smaller reef creatures.

I went on a morning dive with two guides to hang out where the threshers are commonly seen. The guides both saw the shark, but I must have been distracted daydreaming about pygmies, and managed to miss it!

Regular sightings of hammerheads are



Above: Some shore entries can be a bit challenging because of slippery rocks.

reported if you go to the right spot, but currents can be quite strong in these areas.

I only scratched the surface of what Japan has to offer the adventurous diver on this trip. Even Izu and Hachijo offer a

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Tokyo and Osaka have the two largest international airports in Japan. Japan Airlines and ANA have a network of domestic routes, including flight to Hachijo. No visa needed.

DIVING ▶ In Okinawa and Izu Richard Smith dived with Kiki Diving Club, kikidivingclub.com. Its main office is in Tokyo. In Hachijo he dived with Concolor Diving, concolor.biz

ACCOMMODATION ▶ Richard stayed in various types of accommodation, from western-style hotels to traditional *ryokans* or roadhouses.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Typhoon season June-Oct. Most reliable time for diving is Sept-Nov, with good vis and warmer water. Water temperatures drop into the teens in winter, mid-to-high 20s in summer.

CURRENCY ▶ Yen.

PRICES ▶ Inside Japan Tours can offer a nine-night Izu diving package with three nights in Tokyo, five in Shimoda and one in a traditional *ryokan* in Atami. The price of £1824pp (twin share) includes 12 dives on the Izu Peninsula, off Atami and the *Chinsen* wreck, Shimoda and Mikimoto (hammerheads in summer) and across the Izu Islands. International flights are extra, www.insidejapantours.com

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ jnto.go.jp

different complement of animals during different times of the year.

Many other areas around the country also have great diving with various endemics that remain high on my list.

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BE THE CHAMP!



Spectacular light effects achieved by harnessing the sun are highly prized by underwater photographers, but there's no magic bullet – it's all about reading the prevailing conditions, says **ALEX MUSTARD**

'We'll quickly discover why so many underwater photographers shy away from the white ball of death'

LAST MONTH WE TOOK ON rainy-day shooting, so I thought I'd balance that with a brighter note – how to capture beautiful sunbursts in our photos.

That said, capturing the sun in all its glory needs much more than sunny weather. Stunning sunbursts are the reward for paying attention to details. They require us to read the conditions and execute our technique perfectly.

Get it right and those gorgeous rays have a transformative effect on our wide-angle images, converting standard reefscapes into beautiful scenes.

Get it wrong and we'll quickly discover why so many underwater photographers shy away from the "white ball of death", as a poor sunburst can overpower and kill an otherwise attractive scene.

THE SUN BEING OUT is obviously a prerequisite, but just as important photographically is a smooth surface to the water.

When it's windy the surface of the sea becomes ruffled, which breaks up the sunburst, stopping the beams from being focused into attractive rays. Larger waves and swell are not actually a problem as long as their surface is smooth.

On those special millpond days, we have this smooth surface everywhere we go. We should always make the most of these conditions when they come along, but to regularly incorporate sumptuous sunbursts we

cannot rely on luck. We must seek out the ideal conditions.

Most tropical dive destinations are exposed to easterly trade winds, so dive-sites on the protected western sides of islands provide the smoothest water.

Furthermore, as the land heats up more quickly than the sea each day, so breezes develop, with winds blowing from mid-morning to late afternoon.

The calmest conditions and the best sunrays are therefore usually at either end of the day.

Small-scale topography and other obstacles to the wind will also give us small pockets of smooth water that are ideal for exploiting photographically.

The steep sides of protected inland dive-sites, especially those of old quarries, provide this type of shelter. As does a large Red Sea liveaboard, which will create a small patch of millpond even in blustery conditions.

We can also find shelter in locations where coral grows right to surface and

where marine life clings to submerged walls of steep-sided islands, such as around the limestone rock islands of Raja Ampat.

The alert photographer is tuned into these opportunities.

Particularly when on a liveaboard, we should spend a few minutes looking out at the terrain and conditions between dives and plan our diving and photography from what we see.

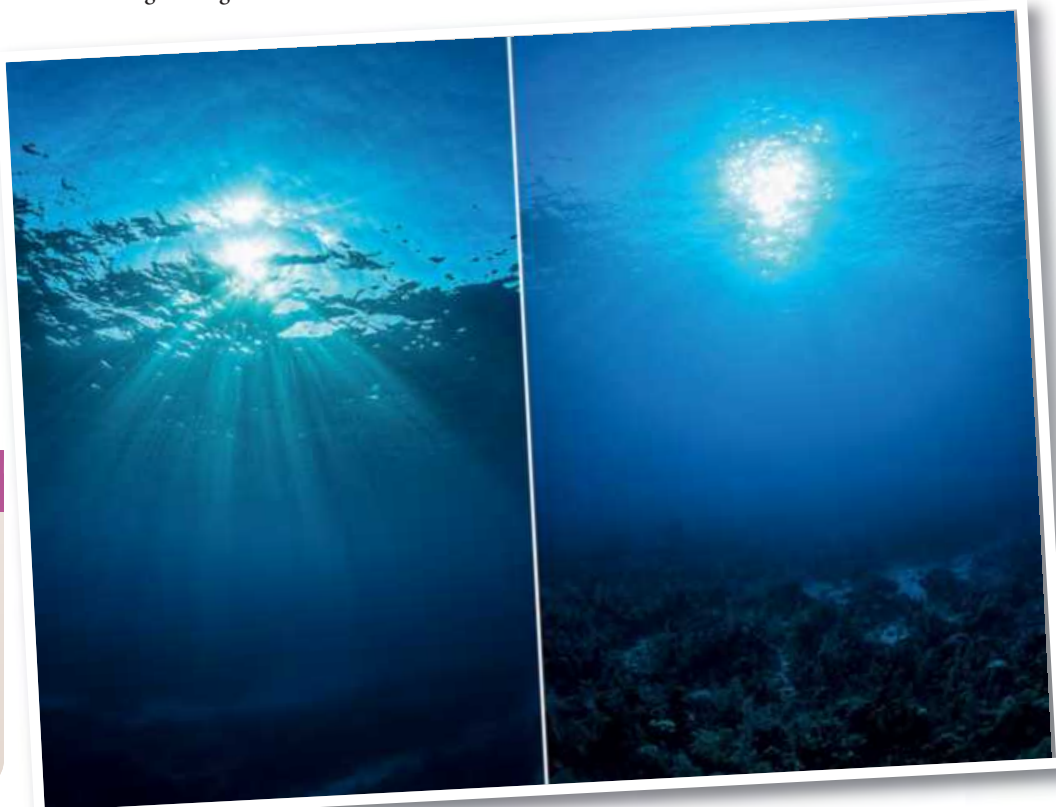
DEPTH IS THE OTHER BIG FACTOR

that affects how a sunburst looks in our images. And the take-home message is that staying shallow is good.

The first reason for staying shallow is that sunrays become increasingly defocused with depth. This is because as they pass through water their light is scattered in all directions, making them weaker and weaker.

Therefore, if we go too deep, we lose the attractive rays radiating out from

Below: Depth, not settings, makes all the difference to sunbursts. These two photos were taken on the same dive, with the same camera and settings. The shallow sunburst (left) at 3m has a pleasing sunball and attractive rays. By 13m the rays are gone, and a cyan halo is appearing around the sun.



STARTER TIP

Attractive sunrays can be photographed in warm and cold, salt and fresh and clear and murky water. The most important factors are sunny conditions, a smooth surface and staying shallow.

The sun can still be used in deeper photos, but it won't give attractive rays at depth.



Pictured: The sun is bright, so you will usually end up using a small aperture and fast shutter speed to capture it. Obscuring the brightest part of the sunball behind something in the image helps balance the exposure.

Taken with Nikon D4 and Sigma 15mm fisheye. Subal housing, 2 x Seacam 150 strobes. ISO 320, 1/250th @ f/22.

the sun in our pictures.

The next argument for staying shallow is that the sun's light becomes increasingly blue with depth, and this affects the edge of the sunball.

The sunball is the area of over-exposure at the centre of the sunburst. We shouldn't worry about this over-exposure, because the sun is super-bright and should be overexposed in an image.

However, we need to control the amount of over-exposure so that it doesn't get ugly. The main reason for incorporating the sun in our pictures is to make them more attractive, not less!

Anyway, depth affects the look of the sunball, because the centre of the sunball over-exposes in all channels, so is white, but at depth as the light becomes almost entirely blue, the edge of the sunball over-exposes only in the blue channel of the image.

This is what creates an ugly cyan-coloured halo around the sun. You don't really need to understand that process, but you should remember that this unsightly cyan halo increases with depth.

I will include the sun in my photos at any depth, for additional contrast and as a focal point. However, if I want a beautiful sunball and sunrays I will dive shallow. How shallow actually depends

on how high the sun is in the sky, which varies with the time of day, latitude and season.

When the sun is high in the sky, such as in the middle of the day in the tropics, I will try to stay in the top 10m to shoot it at its best.

In these conditions the sun creates symmetrical beams, shining out in all directions, known as radial light.

When the sun is low in the sky, I will try to dive much shallower still, because in these conditions the best sunrays are seen only in the top 3m.

Yes, if we're on a safety stop we're too deep, because the beams refracted under water from a low sun quickly lose their intensity!

THIS DAPPLED LIGHT is very attractive, because light from a low sun travels through more atmosphere, endowing it with a warmer colour, and giving the sunburst a more greeny-orange hue.

Below: Peter Scoones named this type of underwater light 'dappled light', created when the sun is low in the sky and the surface is smooth.

Taken with Nikon D4, Nikonos 13mm fisheye, Seacam housing, 2 x Seacam 150 strobes. ISO 320, 1/125th @ f/13.

MID-WATER TIP

A bright sun requires a fast shutter speed and a closed aperture to expose correctly, but the exact settings are not critical. Don't under-expose too much, because this records too dark a water colour.

Instead, try to hide the brightest part of the sun slightly out of frame or behind something in the frame.

ADVANCED TIP

The height of the sun in the sky greatly affects the aesthetics of sunbursts in underwater photos. The lower the sun, the shallower we have to be as photographers to capture its beauty.


Don't worry if the water is slightly murky, it can often help beams show up in pictures.

More importantly, the low angle means that the sunburst is smeared across the surface and the golden rays are spread into layers.

Dappled light is often described as evening light, but this is the view of a lazy tropical diver! Those who can get up for dawn or are willing to go diving on a sunny winter's day at high latitudes will find equally beautiful dappled light in the middle of the day.

In fact, one of my favourite times and places for spectacular dappled light is a winter's day dive at a sheltered inland site in the UK.

The key to great sunbursts is not thinking that there is a magic camera setting to capture them.

They are much more about reading the conditions and diving and shooting with them as your main focus. 





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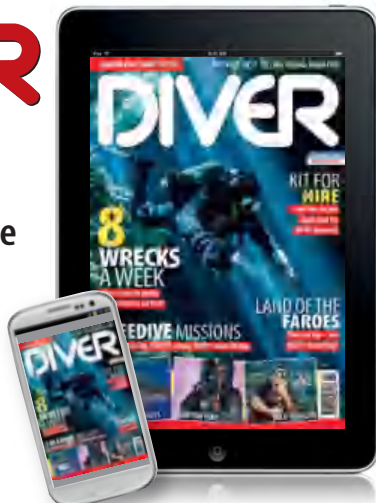
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WHITE AND BLUE OPEN-OCEAN WANDERERS



Divers relish sightings of oceanic whitetips in the Red Sea, or blues off the Azores or even Cornwall. **JAMIE WATTS** gets under the skin of these iconic sharks, with photos by **MALCOLM NOBBS**

IT CAME OUT of nowhere – out of the deep, infinite blue. One second there was nothing, then, gliding slowly and effortlessly just a few metres behind my shoulder, the shark.

Meatier than a reef shark, yet with those big, swept-back fins, dipped in white paint, it was somehow sleeker and more elegant.

It looked fast when it was almost standing still, and it cruised in for a closer look, clearly less afraid of me than any shark I'd seen before.

Individually these are not the biggest or most dramatic of the predatory sharks. On a global ecological scale, however, the oceanic whitetip and the blue are far, far more successful than the great white, tiger or bull shark.

These two among all the sharks have become supreme travellers, foraging effectively across vast areas of open ocean. They are the most successful sharks on Earth.

Smaller and less bulky than great whites, tigers and bulls, they are still pretty big animals. Females of both species can (occasionally) reach 3.5m long, perhaps more with the big female blues, and two to three times the weight of an adult human. The tropical oceanic whitetip is significantly stockier than the slender, coolwater blue shark.

Both mature around age five, at the

length of an adult human, and, if not taken for their fins, probably live 20 years or so. Both can have a litter of a dozen pups every year to 18 months (two dozen or more in the case of large blues).

Both are particularly sleek, with long, swept-back pectoral fins and long tails providing lift. They are built – superbly – to travel.



Above: Oceanic whitetip sharks.

Unlike other sharks they successfully move away from the continental shelves to forage in the sparse open oceans, often for concentrations of squid in moderately deep water. Their distribution ranges are vast.

Ex-king of the tropics

Oceanic whitetips are definitely the more tropical of the two, living in warm surface water of normally 24°C or more.

In *The Natural History of Sharks* of 1969, Thomas Lineaweaver and Richard Backus famously described them as “extraordinarily abundant, perhaps the most abundant large animal... over 100 pounds on the face of the Earth”.

Unfortunately, those big, flag-like fins and the (former) abundance of oceanic whitetips made them prime target for exploitation.

The high dollar value offered for fin cartilage for soup has been one of our more deplorable cultural and economic practices of recent decades. Oceanic whitetips are now far from abundant.

An irony of marine science and fisheries management is that often we can estimate how many of a marine species there used to be only when our catches plummet – when we’re already overfishing enough to drive their numbers down.

We can only make educated guesses about what the populations of these

sharks were in their heyday. We think we started fishing 30-50 million *carcharhinids* (the family that includes blues and whitetips plus warmwater reef sharks) each year in the 1970s and ’80s, but the numbers really started to plummet from the ’90s, when high sharkfin prices led to active targeting.

For the past 20-odd years estimates were as high as 100 million sharks a year.

A reasonable guess at the global population before we started exploiting heavily might be 50-75 million – far more than any seal or dolphin population, or any population of large land animals, apart from humans and our livestock.

Over two decades from 1992, oceanic whitetip catch rates dropped by more than 90%. What’s left are dwindling fast.

Attempts to halt this trend have brought out an inspiring side of the marine and diving community. Graham



Above: Sharks fins on sale.

Left: Oceanic whitetip distribution.



Buckingham and the team at Bite-Back in the UK have gone to the retailers and restaurants; Michael Aw and Ocean Geographic in Singapore approach airlines and the distribution network there; Paul Watson and Sea Shepherd have gone high-profile in Costa Rica and elsewhere, and there are many more.

They have faced an uphill battle against a huge and lucrative industry, and there’s still a way to go. But without their efforts we would have had several extinctions and an even more dire hole ripped into our ocean food-webs.

It’s a fight they may win. Recently former basketball star Yao Ming has been the face of a campaign making inroads in China, the world’s main sharkfin market. The government agreed to stop ordering sharkfin for official functions, and Yao Ming has been credited with halving shark-fin demand. It’s getting there.

OCEANIC WHITETIPS LIVE IN a pretty much continuous belt around the tropics – they like it warm. Tropical seas are mostly food-poor, so they travel between areas of food concentrations, usually where reefs, seamounts or upwelling areas bring prey together.

They sometimes increase their foraging odds by following tuna, pilot whales or smaller dolphin species. Hotspots include the area between east Fiji and Tonga and, in spring, Cat Island in the Bahamas.

British divers know oceanic whitetips from the Red Sea, especially Elphinstone and other reefs in the central and south



Above: Blue shark.

from October to Christmas. Red Sea whitetips are in the north during the warmer months but head south when the north cools down in winter.

Their movements out of the Red Sea and into Yemen waters and the Somali upwelling system are poorly understood. These seas are hugely rich feeding grounds for the sharks, but also areas of intense fishing.

Are whitetips dangerous?

Photographers love oceanic whitetips. They are impressive, bold and curious (to the point of unnerving – I challenge any diver to avoid a raised pulse when one of these heavy-bodied beasts comes close to check you out).

They have also often been described as one of, if not the, most dangerous sharks. They are certainly opportunistic feeders and will investigate divers for – or as – possible food.

Malcolm's photos were taken aboard Jim Abernathy's *Shearwater* around the Bahamas. There was no feeding – closed milk-crates containing chum were lowered and the scent attracted the sharks.

The dives were conducted in blue water, the crates tied to a float with sharks and divers drifting in the current.

"The first encounter with any species is always special and I was very excited," says Malcolm. "Stupidly I got carried away and got too close to the crates. Jim was quick to tell me off."

In 2010 in the northern Red Sea an oceanic whitetip killed a snorkeller, and several more were maimed.

However, these attacks occurred where sharks had been drawn into the shallows by food, and with people paddling at the edge of deep water.

Oceanic whitetips' reputation as killers comes from two infamous, horrific events from WW2. British troop-carrier RMS *Nova Scotia* was torpedoed off South Africa's Natal coast in 1942 and 858 people died in 36 hours. Most were

prisoners of war who didn't get into the single lifeboat the ship managed to launch and clinging instead to wreckage.

Some drowned, but most deaths were attributed to oceanic whitetip attack.

Three years later the fast attack cruiser USS *Indianapolis* was sunk between Guam and the Philippines, and nearly 600 sailors who went into the water died over the next four days.

Oceanic whitetips were seen attacking and killing some, and all these deaths were attributed to this species. Robert Shaw's character Quint memorably described the horror of the *Indianapolis* event in *Jaws*.

These numbers of deaths far exceed the number attributed to any other shark species – four or five times more people than have ever been killed by great whites.

This opportunistic scavenger will

investigate any potential food source up to the size of injured or dead whales.

The *Nova Scotia* and *Indianapolis* situations, with hundreds of people in the water for an extended period clinging to wreckage, were extremely unusual, and from the sharks' perspective an important foraging opportunity.

It's extremely rare for humans to become a scavengeable prey item – part of the food-web instead of sitting above it – but that's what we were on these occasions.

Those incidents aside, oceanic whitetips have been recorded attacking fewer than a dozen people. Millions of these sharks are killed each year for their fins, so if it comes to human v whitetip the statistics are about a million to one in your favour.

Sleek and cool blues

It's unlikely that Lineaweaver & Backus were right about the oceanic whitetip being the most abundant large animal on Earth. Another large shark was once more abundant than any other large marine animal, though some dolphin and seal populations have since overtaken it. This is the blue, the widest-ranging shark of all.

Almost every shark is a variation of yellowish/brownish grey, but the blue is the spectacularly well-named exception.

It's capital blue with an exclamation mark – a vivid, glowing, electric, slightly purplish-blue. Malcolm describes it as a



Right: Blue shark distribution.



“shimmering, metallic blue”. The long, slender, elegant form so coloured makes for arguably the most beautiful of all sharks.

You usually have to travel a bit to find blues, and to be baiting. Malcolm’s photos were taken about 20 miles off Penzance, Cornwall, and in the Algulhas current 30 miles south of the Cape of Good Hope.

Chum can be smelly and there can be a lot of bobbing around on the boats, so these are not trips for the weak of stomach. Preparations for baiting included putting a mat on the side of the RIB to reduce the risk of a shark-bite deflating it.

Where divers regularly interact with blues they are young animals, shy until brought in with chum, and according to Malcolm “occasionally took little nips at inattentive divers”.

These slim, relatively small-mouthed young sharks are considerably less threatening than their stocky whitetipped cousins. Big adults rarely venture where divers are likely to be.

Blues are more tolerant of cool water than any other large, open-ocean, wide-ranging shark. Preferred temperatures of 13-20°C give them access to the rich food resources of temperate seas.

UNLIKE MAKOS, PORBEAGLES and great whites, warm-blooded enough to push into these rich, cool waters, blues keep their metabolisms slow and remain cool-blooded. Their calorie and oxygen needs are therefore far lower than those of their stocky, hot-blooded cousins.

Key to blues’ success are the repetitive cold, deep dives, often to several hundred metres, made into waters where few other large sharks could tolerate either the temperature or the low oxygen levels.

They are caught as bycatch on swordfish fisheries. Like the swordfish, they move through the boundaries between warm- and coldwater masses,



Above: Filming an oceanic whitetip shark.

where small squid and fish concentrate.

Foraging from moderately warm surface seas to cold depths is closer to the behaviour of sperm whales than to that of other sharks.

Like sperm whales they can access large reserves of deep, temperate-water prey – squid particularly – that few big predators can reach. Like sperm whales, this allowed them to become globally abundant.

Young blues in the north-east Atlantic seem to spread out and northwards across the temperate north Atlantic as spring turns to summer and warms and feeds these seas. As they mature, they spread from a nursery area off Portugal and the Bay of Biscay and out to the Azores.

In the UK we get mainly female sharks in the early season, with some smaller males arriving later in summer. A few spread as far as southern Norway at summer’s height.

Late in autumn they head offshore and into deep water closer to the tropics, where they seem to like staying in the cooler waters and deeper, below the warm surface seas.

This may be an energy-saving strategy – keeping the body cool and metabolism slow lowers food and oxygen needs.

Large adults seem to live deeper, beneath tropical seas. The females appear to prefer the upwelling area off the Canaries and north-west Africa, while the males head further west towards the

Caribbean, perhaps doing loops of the north Atlantic via the Gulfstream. The genders meet to breed in spring, before their big feeding season.

The females seem to give birth close to the Equator. Most sharks move within a range of a few hundreds of kilometres a year but occasionally they cross the oceans, covering thousands of kilometres.

Even more occasionally a shark will move between the northern- and southern-hemisphere populations.

South Atlantic blues appear to migrate around the circuit between the rich shelves of Uruguay and Argentina to the west and South Africa and Namibia to the east, with mating off Brazil and Uruguay and nursery areas off South Africa.

Indian Ocean and Pacific populations have their own migration routes and hotspot areas. Blues are everywhere, from south of Africa to Australia to north of Japan and Canada.

AS WITH OCEANIC WHITETIPS, this abundance attracted the attention of fishermen. Perhaps a quarter of sharkfins found in Hong Kong markets comes from at least 12 million blue sharks a year, and fisheries’ catch statistics usually show two to four times as many blues as oceanic whitetips being caught.

There may have been 200 million adult and near-adult blue sharks roaming the oceans a decade or two ago, but intensive finning since the early 1990s has reduced this to a tiny fraction of these numbers.

Both of these magnificent species are natural successes on a huge scale. The plummeting of the populations has been scary but I’m optimistic about their ecological resilience, and suspect that they will be able to recover.

The caveat is us stopping – completely and globally – fishing for sharks. It’s possible, and both these species are more than happy to be feeding nowhere near where we need to be, and just occasionally checking us out in passing.

So maybe I can look forward to being just a little spooked by a big bold oceanic whitetip, or getting another close pass from an electric blue.



Below: Fishing for blue sharks.

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Customised Yucatán

Tour operator Yucatán Dive Trek provides tailor-made diving experiences on Mexico's Yucatán peninsula in Mexico.

A typical itinerary might start in Cancún in the north, where guests can snorkel with whale sharks in summer and sailfish in winter, before heading south to the Mayan Riviera and its famous cenote cavern and cave systems, with dives adapted for recreational or technical divers.

Then it's on to Xcalak and the dive centre of Javier Salas, who owns Yucatán Dive Trek. Xcalak Reef National Marine Park is home to the Great Maya Reef, the second largest reef in the world, and again both rec

and tec divers are catered for, with training included if required.

An excursion to the atoll of

Banco Chinchorro can be included, and in summer crocodile encounters are possible.

Prices depend on itinerary but as a guide from US \$4520pp would buy you a 16-day adventure with all transfers, dives, accommodation, breakfast

and lunch on most days for a group of six.

► www.yucatandivetrek.com



JUDITH HOPPE

A FESTIVAL OF KITTIWAKE

Grand Cayman celebrates the fifth anniversary of the sinking of the popular USS *Kittiwake* wreck this year, and Red Sail Sports is extending the festivities to customers with a US \$200 saving on a special anniversary dive package.

The wreck sits upright and intact in sand off Seven Mile Beach and is well-populated with marine life. For \$565 a guest can enjoy five days of diving with additional two-tank dives for \$102 a day, a wreck night dive, 50% off a one-tank afternoon dive, a free sunset sail, 12-litre dry bag and commemorative medallion. Hotel transfers are not included.



The offer applies until 30 June. On Seven Mile Beach Red Sail Sports operates at the Westin and

Marriott resorts, Grand Cayman Beach Suites and the Ritz Carlton.

► www.diveredssailcayman.com

Surf 'n' dive

Turquoise Holidays is offering a 10-night holiday to the islands of Tahiti from £3485pp, and says this represents a saving of more than £900 per couple. Included are two nights at the InterContinental Tahiti with a half-day surfing lesson with European, South Pacific & Tahiti champion Michel Demont (if you have the energy after diving), four nights at the Moorea Pearl Resort, four nights in an overwater bungalow at Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa, transfers and inter-island and international flights. The offer applies for travel to the end of March.

► www.turquoiseholidays.co.uk

Safety extension

Pro Dive International, which runs PADI 5* dive resorts in Mexico, has extended its collaboration with Divers Alert Network (DAN) to its new location in the Dominican Republic.

"Strict safety and emergency standard procedures have been implemented throughout all our operations, resulting in a clean accident record over the past 12 years, since our founding," said Markus Fleischmann, Pro Dive CEO and founder. "Extending our partnership with DAN means fostering dive safety in several areas, including training, daily operations and dive equipment."

► www.prodivemex.com

Holiday trends

Global travel search-engine Skyscanner in its travel trends forecast for 2016 has identified hotspots that it claims are benefitting from a shift of interest from Egypt, and most offer diving possibilities – particularly Ponta Delgada in the Azores and Sal in Cape Verde. Cuba (specifically Havana) and Japan (Tokyo) are also in the top five.

Skyscanner says its predictions are based on analysis of percentage increases in millions of flight searches from the past three years, combined with qualitative research.

► www.skyscanner.net



DIVERSE ADDS SUDAN

Four hundred coral varieties, more than 1500 species of fish, turtles, mantas and sharks, including scalloped hammerheads, the wreck of Cousteau's *Conshelf II* and the well-preserved WW2 wreck the *Umbria* – it can only be the southern Red Sea off Sudan.

Sudan has been added to the portfolio of Diverse Travel, with the liveaboards *Oceanos* and *Dolce Vita* offering "hotel-style comfort",

nitrox and access to what it promises are uncrowded and well-preserved dive-sites.

Oceanos prices are from £1399pp and on *Dolce Vita* from £1469pp for seven-night packages (two sharing) including return flights from London Heathrow to Port Sudan via Dubai, six days' diving with three dives a day and all meals, transfers and taxes.

► www.diversettravel.co.uk

Budget Maldives for independent travellers



Traditionally a dive-trip to the Maldives has meant staying at an exclusive island resort, which can be expensive. For travellers who don't mind putting their own trips together there is now another way. Male-based Budget Holidays Maldives provides budget accommodation at what it describes as "a fraction of what it usually costs in the high-class resorts."

Here are examples of prices valid until the end of October: five nights on Rasdhoo (right), Thoddoo, Dharavandhoo or Maalhos islands in a 3* hotel (two sharing) with breakfast and wifi and transfers included costs



US \$600. Or get four nights on Maafushi for \$500 – another four-nighter on Hulhumale for the same price includes a free submarine trip for

two and Male city tour.

All the hotels are close to dive centres, according to BHM.

► www.budgetholidays.mv

WRECK-X

Two well-known Aberdeenshire-based wreck experts have launched Wreck-X (Shipwreck Explorers), a company dedicated to providing specialist adventurous expeditions to top global wreck-diving destinations.

Rod Macdonald has written eight diving books with another on the way, while Paul Haynes is a technical-diving instructor and instructor-trainer and a rebreather specialist. In recognition of their North Sea wreck discoveries and contribution to wreck exploration and diving education, both were recently made members of the Explorers Club.

A Wreck-X pilot expedition was conducted last March in Palau, surveying 20 Japanese WW2 wrecks. Now prospective destinations include Truk Lagoon and Palau, the South China Sea, Scapa Flow, Malin Head, Malta, Sicily and Greece.

"The amazing sight of a shipwreck, so often capturing the fateful moment of her sinking, remains one of diving's most powerful experiences," says Macdonald.

"With over 50-years of shipwreck diving and discovery experience between us, both Paul and I are delighted to be able to share this experience with fellow diving enthusiasts from around the world."

► www.wreck-x.com



Wetsuit conditions



The underwater and topside attractions of Galapagos are well-known to divers, but some are put off by the prospect of cold water, reckons Master Liveboards.

However, from January to June the waters in Galapagos are "milder than you realise, around 21-27°C," it says.

"These warmer waters bring along generally better visibility, calmer seas and a lot of mantas!"

Galapagos Master was launched last May and has been operating at full capacity, but if you don't manage to take advantage of a cancellation this year there is always next year.

Seven-night trips start from US \$4850 and 10 nights from \$6250 in the first half of the year.

► www.masterliveboards.com

ROBERT WILPERING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE IN NORWAY

Gulen Dive Resort, just north of Bergen on Norway's west coast, has become the first Norwegian dive

operator to receive an official tourism award. It has received the Innovation Norway Tourism Award

2015 for the Sogn og Fjordane "home of the fjords" region. Innovation Norway is responsible for the official Norwegian travel guide.

"We're very proud and happy to receive this prestigious award," said resort-owners Monica Bakkeli and Ørjan Sandnes on being handed a cheque for almost £4000.

"For a small company like ours, it's a dream come true simply to be nominated." Sustainability, economy, innovation and international market potential were among the criteria for nomination.

The resort, established in 2001, is known for wreck-diving, photo workshops and events such as the Periphylla and Nudibranch Safaris.

► www.gulendiveresort.com



SCUBAPIXEL/CHRISTIAN SKAUGE

Amateurism v greed & politics in the '70s

Adventures in Murky Waters
by Kenneth Clark

THIS IS AN INTRIGUING

BOOK that starts off as one thing and ends up as quite another. The title hints that all is not what it seems about this non-fiction chronicle of UK club diving in the 1970s, and it lives up to that promise.

A long way into Ken Clark's book we are still assuming that this is no more than a series of entertaining episodes from an illustrious diving career with, running through it, the thread of a six-year project to raise the wreck of the *Gitana*, a sunken Victorian steamboat, from Scotland's Loch Rannoch.

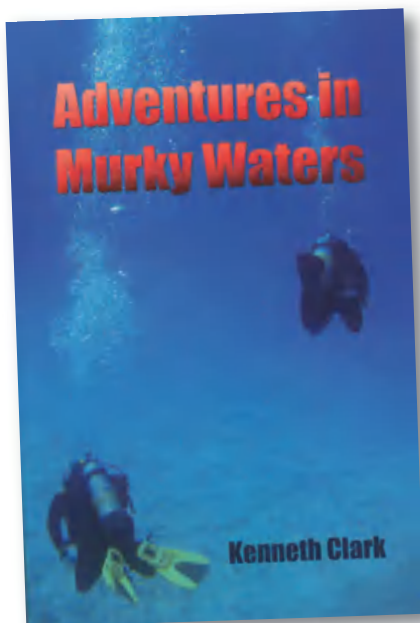
Raising wrecks was Clark's thing. As a diver it seems he liked nothing better than to think up the next challenge, preferably something with obstacles that would call upon his engineer's mind as well as, with any luck, explosive charges.

In his world there was little thought of just leaving wreckage for others to enjoy (or pillage) – it had to be raised, even if a group of Sea Scouts had to be convinced that they really *needed* the remains at their clubhouse.

And a lot of the raising was hilariously inept, as when, early on, a Bristol Beaufighter is brought up and promptly disintegrates. This was only the first of several aircraft recovery projects that may have been ingenious but were carried out in questionable circumstances.

Ken Clark not only relished his projects but clearly loved organising expeditions and other divers.

Most importantly, he insisted that a Corinthian spirit of amateurism should



prevail. He and his wife Dinah must have had deep pockets, because they seem to have paid for huge amounts of equipment, travel and making good of cock-ups from their own pockets.

They were also good at enthusing and engaging the help of volunteers, however – whatever it took to avoid the whiff of commercialism sullied their diving endeavours.

I'm sure there are senior divers who may have different versions of the tales told here, but for Clark his idealistic, "fun" approach was in the end undone by greedy rivals posing as friends who would stop at nothing to steal his glory and headlines, pilfer artefacts and make whatever cash they could on the side.

The culprits, now dead, are named as the book reaches its rather bitter climax – undermined a bit by badly located photos with spoiler captions that tell you what happens well before you reach that point in the text.

By this time it's clear that the book has turned from humorous chronicle

to a "now it can be told" vindication of Clark's straight-ahead approach.

The author won the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Medal for his work on the *Gitana* project, but you get the feeling that he has waited a long time to tell it as it is about events that most people have long forgotten.

For all that, I really enjoyed this book as a window on diving 40 years ago. As a catalogue of comic errors (for which, to be fair, the author often seems happy to take the blame), as well as diving achievements, it takes some beating.

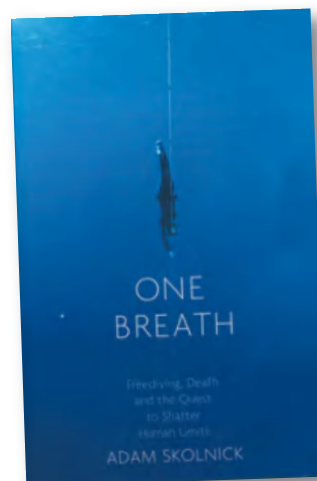
I particularly enjoyed the little period touches, as when Clark forgets to load film into his underwater camera, or inadvisedly takes his diving knife aboard an international aircraft – it's confiscated by the first officer amid much hilarity on the part of the cabin crew, and returned to him on landing. The past truly is another world.

Steve Weinman

Austin Macauley
ISBN: 9781785541896
Softback, 272pp, £12.99

SHATTERED LIMITS

One Breath
by Adam Skolnick



THIS IS A TRAGIC TALE OF A NEW sport, egos and the dangers of information spreading unchallenged through the Internet.

Based around the first death in competitive freediving, which occurred in 2013, it portrays the sport (or rather a micro-culture within a small group of competitive freedivers) as a hotbed of sun, sea, sex and "shattered limits".

This non-fiction book portrays competitive freediving as a playground for well-off

thirtysomethings to travel, meet up and compete with each other around the world.

The timelines are quite confusing, and this is not helped by Adam's awkward writing style. I'm not sure that the detailed descriptions of every single one of Nick Mevoli's tall, slender, athletic girlfriends, lovers and flings enhance the story, but they certainly add to the image the author paints of a slightly immature diver who has regular temper tantrums and refuses to listen to medical advice, his friends or (more importantly) his own body.

Throughout the book the author implies that all freedivers are obsessed with competing and pushing themselves to near-death experiences, an image as absurd as suggesting that everyone who goes for a run has aspirations to be the next Usain Bolt or Mo Farah.

The reality of the sport is that the vast majority of freedivers participate and train for the chance to experience nature, for personal development or for simple enjoyment.

In 2010 I published a book outlining the dangers of a freediving equalisation technique called mouthfill, as well as extolling the virtues of thoracic (chest) flexibility.

So I was upset to find the first chapter of *One Breath* pushing the message that "everyone ignored or didn't know the dangers of mouthfill", but pleasantly surprised as the latter half of the book suggests that the upper echelons of competitive freediving have finally begun to accept that thoracic flexibility is the key to safe deep freediving.

Interestingly, although coughing blood is unfairly portrayed throughout the book as commonplace among freedivers (and portrayed as normal for top-level competitive divers), it is revealed in the last chapter that many freedivers, for example the book's hero William Trubridge, have never coughed blood after a dive.

Adam's "revelation" that the best freediver in the world has never had a "lung squeeze" proves that the risks involved in this beautiful sport can be seriously reduced when using the correct training ideology.

If you're interested in the events that led to the first death in competitive freediving, read this book. If you're interested in freediving, find yourself a local club or a decent instructor.

Marcus Greatwood

Corsair
ISBN: 9781472152022
Hardback, 336pp, £20

TOP 10 BEST-SELLING DIVING BOOKS

as listed by www.amazon.co.uk (8 December, 2015)

1. *Fifty Places to Dive Before You Die*, by Chris Santella
2. *Dive: The World's Best Diving Destinations*, by Lawson Wood
3. *Stars Beneath the Sea: The Incredible Story of the Pioneers of the Deep Sea*, by Trevor Norton
4. *The Silent World*, by Jacques-Yves Cousteau
5. *Diver Down: Real-World Scuba Accidents and How to Avoid Them*, by Michael R Ange
6. *Reef Fish Identification Tropical Pacific*, by Gerald Allen, Roger Steene & Paul Humann
7. *Amazing Diving Stories – Incredible Tales from Deep Beneath the Sea*, by John Bantin
8. *Diving the World*, by Beth & Shaun Tierney
9. *The Darkness Below*, by Rod Macdonald
10. *Goldfinder*, by Keith Jessop



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WELL AND TRULY TESTED



Bright ideas in weight-locking for BCs, in changing clothes with a modicum of dignity, in giving the simple spool a twist, and in mask transparency – NIGEL WADE reports

BC MARES QUANTUM

AFTER THE DIVE SHOW AT BIRMINGHAM'S

NEC, I snuck away from the popular New Product Showcase with a BC to test. It was so new at the time that the show-goers had been the very first people to see it outside of Italy.

The BC in question had been launched at the event by the UK branch of Italian gear giant Mares; it was its latest jacket-style compensator, the Quantum.

The Design

The Quantum is a traditional, front-adjustable, jacket-style BC. The main body is constructed from tough Cordura, with a bladder that's a new concept for Mares BCs. It's designed to deliver a high lift-capacity while maintaining a low profile at the sides to allow optimum mobility and freedom of movement.

A newly designed and patented integrated-weight set-up called the Slide and Lock-System (SLS) has been included. This features an indicator to allow the user and buddy to instantly confirm that the integrated weight-pouches are locked and secure, and there are two further integrated pockets set either side of the tank position for trim-weights.

Two large cargo-pockets are made with a tough, elastic and abrasion-resistant material the maker calls Supratek. The elastic properties allow the pockets to compress around their contents and maintain a low profile. Access is via front zippers.

The Quantum harness includes swivel-joints at the shoulders and well-placed D-rings for attaching ancillaries. Hose tunnels are provided for streamlined gauge and octopus use, along with grommets for knife-attachment.

The Quantum has a padded mono backplate



that's designed to take both single- and twin-tank set-ups, and is finished in all-black, with micro-injected cosmetic labels.

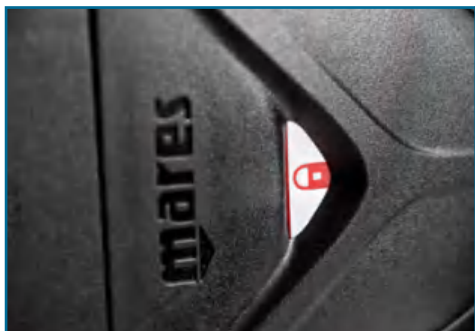
In Use

I used solid block-weights in the integrated SLS system. They sat inside zipped pouches and were secured by sliding them along the internally fitted weights either side of the waist-belt.

Solid handles on the pouch make the attachment process easy, and a firm push of the centre red section then locked the system positively into position.

When this had been done, the red Unlocked icon on the side changed to a white Locked version. It's not big but it's easy to see, and gave an instant indication of the state of play.

Attaching hoses, gauges and octo was easy, thanks to the excellent placement of the D-rings. There is even a small plastic ring



The Quantum SLS locked icon is small but easy to see.



Swivel shoulder connections on the Quantum BC.



Two trim-weight pockets at the rear of the air-cell.

strategically placed on the right-hand shoulder harness to attach a console via a lanyard, and this puts the console within line of sight when diving in a horizontal position.

The whole set-up was extremely comfortable to dive in. Virtually everything is padded, and the swivel-buckles on the chest allowed the harness to nestle without being restrictive.

The sternum-strap is positioned quite high, so it didn't interfere with my drysuit inlet, and a clever feature is that it adjusts only on the left, so the loose end of the strap doesn't interfere with the shoulder-dump toggle.

The backplate has an integrated carry-handle at the top, and allowed me to manhandle the whole scuba unit easily when on land.

Under water the Quantum sat perfectly on my drysuit-clad torso. Padded kidney sections featuring a textured surface meant that it didn't slip and ride up my body when the bladder was fully inflated.

The BC held me in my preferred orientation under water and, as is the case with most jacket-style BCs, put me in an armchair position at the surface.

Gas migrated well around the air-cell and was easy to discharge from any of the three dump-valves, whatever position I was in at the time.

I didn't use the knife-attachment grommets

or the hose-tunnels so I can't comment on them, but I did put a spare mask in one of the pockets and a DSMB and spool in the other. The zippers were easy to find, and slid downwards to open.

The elasticated Supratek held the contents in position until I removed them, and would no doubt help prevent the loss of contents should you forget to zip up the pockets.

Conclusion

The Quantum appears to be the culmination of years of experience from the clever Italians who brought the world's best-ever fins to the diving



A choice of tunnels or D-rings for securing hoses.

SPECS

PRICE » £314

INTEGRATED WEIGHTS » Yes, SLS

TRIM WEIGHT POCKETS » Yes

TANK CONNECTION » Single camband

SIZES » S, M, L, XL, XXL

WEIGHT » 4.23kg (size M)

D-RINGS » Six large, five small

CONTACT » www.mares.com

DIVER GUIDE ★★★★★★☆☆

world. The little design details all add up to make this "feature-rich" BC functional and extremely comfortable.

I loved the weight-locking system, which is possibly the best I've seen. It pushed into place with a positive click and then showed anyone who cared to look that it was locked and secure.

The only downside is the Quantum's weight. I'm being picky here, but for travelling divers it is a bit on the heavy side at 4.32kg (size M). However, its performance and comfort were good enough for me to consider leaving unwanted underwear, toiletries and T-shirts at home to make the baggage-weights and take it abroad with me. ■

CHANGING ROBE DRYROBE ADVANCE

IT'S FREEZING TODAY. I need to dive, which is no problem, because my exposure suit will keep me warm while I'm doing my thing. The problem is that there's nowhere private to get changed out of the wet dive-gear when I'm finished.

To make matters worse, a constant throng of dog-walkers (who really don't want to witness a wet and naked diver shivering and struggling to get into warm, dry clothes) frequent the beach. Have you been there too?

Thankfully, UK-based Dryrobe has come up with the ideal solution. Born among the tough South-west coast surfing community, its range of changing robes could provide divers with a warm and cloistered way to get out of wet dive-gear and keep their dignity intact. It sent me one to try.

The Design

The Dryrobe Advance I had on test was the short-sleeved version. It's made with a 100% waterproof and windproof outer-shell fabric featuring a one-piece body design, with the minimal number of seams sealed to retain the robe's waterproof integrity.

On the inside the robe is fully lined with a



Nigel looking slightly sinister beneath the Dryrobe Advance, but at least there are no more choruses of *Who Ate All The Pies?*

synthetic lambswool thick pile fleece. It's designed to wick water away and leave the skin dry, at the same time providing substantial insulation.

The robe has a lined hood and a chunky full-length two-way YKK zipper. The half-length sleeves are large in diameter, to allow wearers to tuck their arms inside and facilitate the changing process.

There is an A4-sized internal pocket designed to store dry underwear prior to stripping and changing, along with a waterproof internal zip-entry media pocket for the surfer's essential companion – an MP3 player – and two fleece-lined external pockets to keep the hands warm.

In Use

I took the Dryrobe to my favourite inland haunt of Wraysbury. It wasn't a freezing-cold day but it was on the nippy side, especially after an hour or so under water putting kit through the **DIVER Tests** treadmill.

I always find it a pain to drag my dry clothes (when I'm soaking wet) from the back of my truck to changing rooms at these inland sites, then have to drag all the wet stuff back.

It would be much quicker to get changed in the car-park standing under the cover of a tailgate if it's raining, and chuck the wet gear into gear-gulpers in the boot as I'm doing it.

Call me lazy (you're probably right) but to me there's no reason to be faffing about when I could be chowing down on bacon butties in the

SPECS

PRICES ▶ Small, £75. Adult, £95. XXL, £110

MATERIAL ▶ Waterproof/windproof outer shell. Synthetic lambswool lining

COLOURS ▶ Black-red, black-pink, black-orange, black-green, red-grey, navy-grey

WEIGHT ▶ 1.3kg

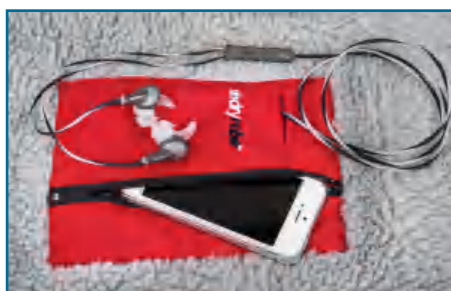
CONTACT ▶ www.dryrobe.com

DIVER GUIDE ★★★★★★★★☆☆

warm confines of the clubhouse.

I had already unzipped my drysuit and rolled the top-half down. I donned the Dryrobe, pulled my arms inside through the sleeves and completed the stripping-down process.

There was plenty of room inside the garment,



Waterproof internal media pocket for the surfer's essential companion – an MP3 player. Divers could store their wallet or phone there.

which meant unhindered movement, and it was warm – very warm.

I had previously placed my underwear and socks inside the big internal pocket, making them easy to access and put on, but putting a T-shirt and sweater on in the dark confines of the robe was less straightforward.

I ended up with the shirt on back-to-front and inside-out, but I did manage to get fully dressed without flashing my man-bits at the unsuspecting world – even if I was a little dishevelled by the time I'd finished.

Conclusion

The Dryrobe is a well-designed, well-made product that does exactly what the makers say it will – keeps the wearer warm, dry and concealed while emerging from wet exposure suits.

Had I chosen a colour scheme for myself, it wouldn't have been the all-red version. I was expecting a line-up of young kids to appear asking where I'd parked my sleigh, and could they have a new X-Box for Christmas.

That said, the bright red robe could be an advantage on those days when you draw the short straw and have the thankless but essential task of providing surface cover.

It would give a hi-vis profile while keeping you warm and dry at the same time.

The Dryrobe Advance did the job, kept me toasty-warm and, for the first time in ages, I didn't hear anyone singing *Who Ate All The Pies?* Win-win. ■

FINGER REELS APEKS LIFELINE SPOOLS

IN MY OPINION THE HUMBLE DELAYED SURFACE MARKER BUOY (DSMB) is such an important piece of diver safety equipment that no diver should get into the water without one. Thankfully they have become almost standard fare in UK waters, but I'm also seeing them used more and more on my travels.

These DSMBs can't be deployed without using some form of reel and line, and it's in this field that I've noticed that trends have been steadily changing.

I own and use ratchet reels loaded with more than 100m of white nylon cord, and use them for laying lines when penetrating wrecks – they're big, heavy and cumbersome.

So it's no wonder that small, simple drums of line have appeared on the scene. They're called spools, and they invariably hold about 25m of line and are light in weight and cheap to buy.

British technical dive-gear maker Apeks has



The range of Apeks Lifeline spools.

taken this simple concept to a new level with its latest range of LifeLine Spools, as I've been finding out.

The Design

LifeLine Spools are machined from a solid billet of aircraft-grade aluminium, then given a

smooth but tough anodised coating. The sides are flared to give more room for winding the line, and the edges have been knurled during the machining process to provide a non-slip grip when in use under water.

The line used is a flat tape made by rock-climbing specialist Edelrid. It has immense tensile strength for its size and is a fluorescent



This is the correct way to stow the spool for clipping off on a BC D-ring.

orange colour. At one end it's been stitched into a loop, as opposed to a tied knot, to retain its integrity and reduce its profile.

A high-tensile nickel-plated marine brass swivel is attached to the Edelrid line to take care of twist, and the business end is finished with a hi-vis yellow, ultra-high molecular-weight polyethylene Dyneema leader. This material is renowned as the strongest fibre available, and is extremely abrasion-resistant.

The 33cm leader is stitched into a permanent loop, with the stitch forming a 7cm stiff tab finished with a short length of shrink tube. Each spool is supplied with a high-quality 316 stainless double-ended bolt-snap.

Lifeline Spools come in three sizes, each colour-coded. The smallest holds 15m of line and is purple, the intermediate green version 30m and the largest holds 45m and is blue.

The spools haven't been over-filled with line, which keeps the holes round the circumference clear and accessible.

In Use

I've been using these Lifeline spools for a few months now, mainly for DSMB deployment. The smallest has seen the most use, especially on overseas trips. For me 15m is the ideal length of line for bagging off on ascent at the end of a dive before conducting mandatory safety-stops, and the purple spool proved ideal for this job.

The first thing I learnt was the optimal way to stow the spool. At first I simply clipped the bolt-snap through one of the holes around the edge with the leader loop through the clip and

secured it to a D-ring on my BC.

I've since learned that this method of attachment can lead to the bolt-snap being forced open if it's pushed to a 90° angle.

At best the leader will still be secured, but you'll end up trailing all the line with the spool unwinding, eventually dangling on the end beneath you.

At worst, you could see your essential bit of safety kit disappear into the abyss.

The correct way to attach the spool is to pass about 12cm of leader through an edge hole and then wrap the leader around and through the bolt-snap. It's easier to do than to explain (see picture).

Everything about the design of these Lifeline spools is geared for efficiency and safety. The centre hole has smooth rounded edges, which allowed the spool to spin effortlessly while held between my thumb and forefinger as my DSMB sped towards the surface. The centre hole is also large enough to use with gloved hands.

Wrapping the line back on the spool during ascent was an easy operation. The knurled edges really came into their own, providing much-needed traction, and the flared profile gave more room than the standard spools I'd used in the past.

The inclusion of the swivel proved to be genius, taking out all the twist caused when wrapping line. I've seen divers end up in all sorts



The clever bit – inclusion of a swivel between the Edelrid line and Dyneema leader.

of a mess with severely twisted lines in the past, and this is a problem with which I'm sure all spool-users have had to deal.

The leader was extremely easy to attach to my DSMB. You simply poke the stiff tab through the buoy strap, then loop the spool body through the loop.

The same method can be used to attach the leader to cave-lines or wreckage when it's being used as a guideline in overhead environments, and the stiff tab makes it easy to remove the leader when you've finished.

Conclusion

Apeks has made the simple spool hi-tec by using the best available materials and design concepts. It says that technical diving provided the inspiration but it can be used in a variety of diving applications.

Lifeline spools ooze quality – they're a joy to use, fit for purpose and, to me, are things of engineered beauty. My ratchet-reels will still have a place in my dive-bag, but I can't see them getting an outing for anything other than deep technical or deep drift dives.

I've been intrigued to learn why travelling divers sometimes don't take a DSMB with them abroad. The common answer is that they can save weight by excluding heavy and bulky reels, but now there's no excuse – a purple Lifeline spool weighs a measly 91g, and takes up next to no space.

Being able to locate a diver from the surface should be considered risk-critical, and the simple DSMB does the job perfectly. I learnt my lesson the hard way, after being left adrift for two hours in mid-Channel some years ago.

Since that terrifying ordeal I wouldn't jump in the water without one, and nowadays it's likely to be attached to one of these Apeks bad boys. ■

SPECS

PRICE ▶ 15m, £43. 30m, £60. 45m, £70

MATERIAL ▶ Anodised aircraft-grade aluminium

COLOURS ▶ Purple, green, blue (size-dependent)

WEIGHT ▶ 15m, 91g. 30m, 158g. 45m, 179g (without bolt-snaps)

LINE ▶ Edelrid

LEADER ▶ Dyneema

SWIVEL ▶ Nickel-plated brass

CONTACT ▶ www.apekssdiving.com/uk

DIVER GUIDE ★★★★★★★★★★



The large blue 45m Lifeline spool.



With and without the FogCity anti-fog inserts.

ANTI-FOG FOGCITY INSERTS

I'M RELIABLY INFORMED THAT WHEN DIVE MASKS are constructed the skirts are moulded using liquid silicon. This quickly cures and hardens in the steel moulds, but it needs an oily liquid agent to prevent the silicon from adhering to the moulds' surfaces so that it can be easily freed.

During the second phase of construction, this "release agent" contaminates the mask lenses before it dries, resulting in the surface of the glass becoming hydrophobic and repelling water.

This hydrophobia causes the water to form tiny globules on the glass's inner surface. We know this as condensation or fog and it causes a total lack of vision, which, when under water, can be more than annoying – it can be downright dangerous.

Being able to read gauges and dive-computer screens is, after all, critical to diver safety. Motorcyclists suffer from a similar problem with their helmet visors steaming up, again a risk-critical problem.

FogCity is part of the Pinlock group, which produces specially formulated self-adhesive visor inserts for the military, emergency services and bikers. It now produces the same material in a version cut for dive-mask applications, and sent me some to try out.

The Design

The plastics used in the FogCity inserts have a chemical formula that absorbs the moisture, keeping its surface free from condensation. The inserts are adhesive on one side and simply

stick to the glass surface inside the mask. One corner section is adhesive-free to aid removal.

The inserts are available for both twin- and single-lens masks, with two sizes to cover most of the popular mask models. They have a limited lifespan, however, and will need to be changed after 20 or so dives, because as they absorb moisture the chemicals are depleted. The lifespan is shortened further if the inserts are used in chlorinated swimming pools.

In Use

The inserts were a doddle to apply – all I had to do was stick them on to the inside of the mask lenses. The glass surfaces needed to be clean and free from detritus, and I found that I had to apply pressure with a finger from the centre of the insert to squeeze out any trapped air, but once done they stayed in place.

Under water they worked like a charm. I had deliberately taken a new mask with me, one that hadn't had the silicon release agent removed with an hour or so of scrubbing with toothpaste.

There was the added advantage that I didn't need to apply any defogging fluid (spit) or use any propriety agents such as baby shampoo or



Mask Clear to keep the lenses fog-free.

Between dives I could also avoid having to place them in that bucket of diluted snot and sunscreen that's always found at the back of a dive-boat.

Under water they stayed clear, giving me unrestricted vision when looking for critters to photograph and, more importantly, when assimilating the complex information

displayed on my computer screen.

I used the inserts for a full week of intensive diving in Egypt's Red Sea, and they performed as well on the last dive as they had on the first.

Conclusion

I've been testing masks for these pages like a man possessed for more than two years now, with each one going through the toothpaste routine and having propriety agents applied before each dive to stop it fogging.

I sometimes take two masks on each dive, swapping them over under water, and this invariably results in the second mask becoming completely misted up, because any anti-fog treatment has been washed away long before I put it on.

These inserts would have saved me a pile of trouble and anxiety in these circumstances, and it's where I'd use them mostly.

I think the limited lifespan is a drawback, but they should last for a full diving holiday or liveaboard trip, and you can put your mask back in its protective box between dives instead of a germ bucket or, worse still, the dedicated rinse-tank for my camera housing.

The alternative is to rub the prints off your index fingers with vigorously applied bi-carb of soda toothpaste as you polish the mask lenses into a shine. This is very cheap, and will help to stop that condensation appearing indefinitely. ■

SPECS

PRICE ►► £11 (two sets of inserts)

VARIANTS ►► Twin-lens, single-lens

SIZES ►► Two

CONTACT ►► www.fogcitysolutions.com

DIVER GUIDE - ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

BC

APD COMMANDO ESCAPE ALL BLACK

IN THE APRIL 2015 DIVER TESTS I delivered a 10-star review of the Commando Escape Sub Three Zero BC from Ambient Pressure Diving. In the conclusion I wrote: "Most people I've bored with the finer attributes of this magnificent product have stopped the conversation dead by asking: 'Does it come in all-black?'"

I'm pleased to report that those Cornish

pixies at APD have listened to my request for a "little black number" and are now in a position to supply them as a special order.

This All Black BC has the same specification, features and price as AP Diving's standard black and yellow Escape. ■



The Commando Escape as a "little black number".

SPECS

PRICE ►► £270

COLOUR ►► Black

SIZES ►► S, M, L, XL, XXL

D-RINGS ►► Four aluminium, four plastic

POCKETS ►► Four, zipped entry

CONTACT ►► www.apdiving.com

DIVER GUIDE - ★★★★★★★★★★

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NEW BUT UNTESTED

The latest kit to hit the dive shops

Apeks RK3 Fins ▼▼▼▼

Designed in collaboration with the US military, Apeks RK3 fins are made from thermoplastic rubber and feature an oversized foot-pocket to accommodate drysuit boots, and a stainless-steel spring-strap. Apeks says that the fins are rugged and compact, with their short, wide, vented blades providing maximum thrust while maintaining great manoeuvrability. RK3s come in medium, regular and super sizes in either all-black or all-white, and are priced at £120.

►► www.apeksgiving.com/uk



Scubapro A700 Carbon Black Tech ▲▲▲▲

Scubapro has released its high-performance Mk25 EVO / A700 regulator in a Carbon Black Tech version. It claims that the Black Tech PVD coating is highly scratch- and corrosion-resistant and that the addition of a carbon-fibre cover to the A700 second stage (weighing only 10g) provides a stylish yet rugged finish. It costs £659.

►► www.scubapro.com

Scubapro Litehawk BC ►►►

Scubapro's Litehawk is a lightweight back-flotation travel BC constructed from 420-denier nylon. Its features include an integrated-weight system, trim-weight pockets, a low-profile air-cell with elastic cords and a clutter-free ergonomic harness. The LiteHawk is available in three sizes with 13.2kg lift capacity and priced at £259.

►► www.scubapro.com



Gucci Dive Collection ◀◀◀

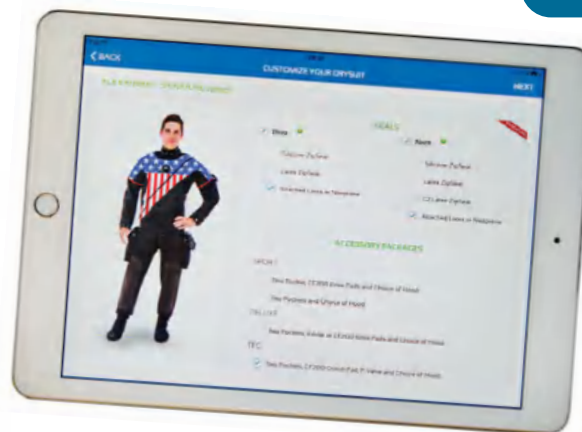
Gucci has added new watches to its Dive Collection. Included is the unmemorably designated YA136206, featuring a 45mm stainless case with a black face and unidirectional bezel and a red and green nylon strap, while the YA136303 has a 40mm case with a jet-black face with red accents and a black rubber strap. Both models have quartz movements and are depth-rated to 200m. Expect to pay £620 and £695 respectively.

►► www.goldsmiths.co.uk

Trailpod Roller Bag >>>>

This ingenious modular all-terrain bag system features a patented three-wheel suspension system, which the designers claim delivers unrivalled stability on and off the road. The Trailpod uses a rotating reinforced polymer exoskeletal frame and three hemi-spherical wheels on a floating axle to spread the load and make the wheels less likely to sink or dig into soft surfaces. The Trailpod is priced at US \$249.

>> www.trailpod.co.uk



DUI My Drysuit App <<<<

San Diego-based drysuit maker Diving Unlimited International reckons you should now be spending your surface intervals designing your ultimate drysuit. Its new app reveals a wide choice of fabrics and patterns from which to custom-build your own design. There is also the facility

to take a selfie and add your face on the DUI suit. The app functions on iPads and iPhones running iOS 7.0 or later, and is available free from the iTunes App Store or from...

>> www.dui-online.com

Aqua Lung Explorer Bag Collection >>>>

The 2016 Explorer Bag collection from Aqua Lung includes a regulator case, 80-litre mesh duffel, 87l back-pack, 95l duffel, 95l mesh roller, 45l carry-on and a 140l roller. Features found throughout the range include corner-guards, wrapped handles, padded mesh, drain-grommets, gear-loops and locking zips. The Explorer bags are black with blue accents and livery and are priced from £14 for the regulator case to £123 for the 140l roller.

>> www.aqualung.com/uk



SAFETY FIRST

So what exactly do you carry in your BC pockets against the unthinkable – the day you get lost at sea? We have a new take on what every diver should know

NIGEL WADE

NEXT ISSUE

SIMPLY THE BEST

Leigh Bishop guides his scooter around the *Justicia*

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It's near, it's action-packed – it's south-east Spain

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Eye-popping sights off Tahiti and Moorea

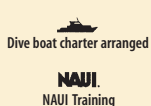
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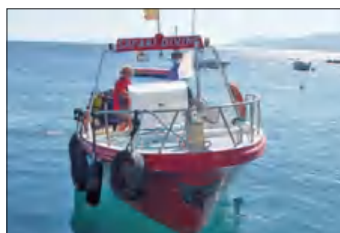
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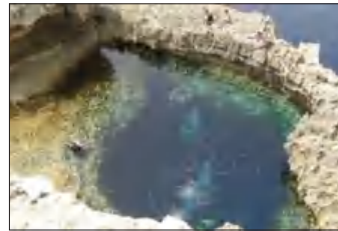


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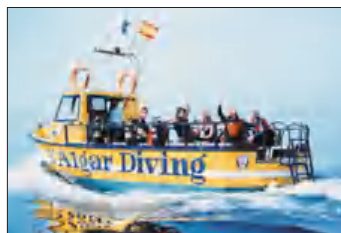
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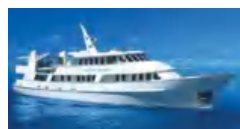
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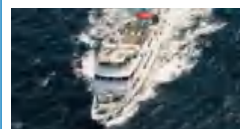
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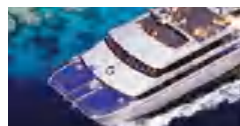
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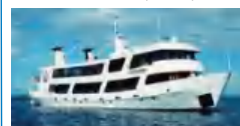
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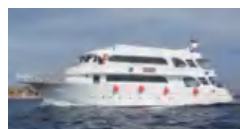
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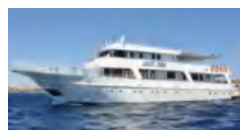
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Cockleshell Divers, Portsmouth, Hants. Small, friendly club welcomes new and experienced divers from all agencies. Meets at Cockleshell community centre, Fridays at 8pm. Email: cockleshelldivers@aol.co.uk (64752)

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Liverpool WAPSAC. Friendly, active training club based at Knowsley Leisure Park, L34. Welcomes new and experienced divers. Weekly meetings. Contact John: 07833 647 134 or @WAPSAC (56335)

Llantrisant SAC, two RIBs, towing vehicle, welcomes new and experienced divers. Meet at Llantrisant Leisure Centre 8pm Mondays. Contact Phil: (01443) 227667. www.llantrisantdivers.com (54598)

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Sutton Coldfield SAC, friendly BSAC club, welcomes all divers from trainee to advanced. All agencies. Own RIBs and compressor. Meet every Wednesday, 8.15pm at Wyndley (3.4m pool). For free try-dive call Alan: 07970 573638 or Mark: 07787 106191. (64964)

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Imagine – if you had only 36 shots

What would happen if underwater photographers set a quota of shots per dive? Their pictures would improve, argues **SIMON BENJAMIN**

HAD BEEN DIVING for three or four years by the time I acquired an underwater camera. However, as a couple of trips to inland sites quickly confirmed, owning a camera was no guarantee to obtaining the photographs that might impress friends or buddies.

Even in the stillness of a Leicestershire quarry, unforeseen problems soon became apparent.

It was cold and murky, and I could barely feel my camera's means of adjustment through 5mm of neoprene. I couldn't even get the lens of my mask aligned with the viewfinder, a task that had seemed simple enough in the dive-shop.

Even with the guidance of Martin Edge's underwater photography bible, initial returns were disappointing.

I had been realistic in my expectations of these pre-digital efforts, and when the results came back from Agfa I was concerned only about what the people developing the film must have been thinking as they cut the 35mm celluloid into slides.

In those days Agfa would enclose a note indicating possible reasons for the failure of its customers' photographic efforts.

Nevertheless, encouraged by some images of aquatic life-forms that were almost identifiable, I continued my pursuit of excellence. Next stop were the gentle, warm waters of Brighton.

An inland site can be a good place to hone photography skills but, much like the diving itself, it may not fully prepare the photographer for the rigours of the sea.

WITH THE ADDITIONAL FACTOR of current, trying to take a picture of an edible crab was considerably more difficult than I had anticipated.

The crab, it seemed, wasn't into photography. By the time I had selected the most appropriate lens and set the correct aperture and focal length, it had scuttled off sideways to rejoin its friends.

My buddy on those early sea trials was patient, and understood that perfecting my camera skills might take some time. He periodically tapped his air gauge and indicated that he wouldn't move off – unlike the crab.

Lighting? Surely that couldn't be too difficult. The pictures of my brother's wedding had turned out OK,

and the flash I'd used on that great day cost less than the one I'd been sold with my camera.

Using the methods perfected at the wedding, I eventually captured the image of a crab in ambient light, and moved on to a resting dogfish. All I had to do now was press the shutter, up to 36 times.

The film was sent off for processing. In the days of film and glossy 6x4in prints, when patience was a virtue, there was a certain pleasure in awaiting the return of your film as colour slides. A holiday over, dive-club members would return to work, eagerly

this novice photographer a lot of time and money!

Take a picture in air, and very little comes between your lens and the subject. Take a picture (or 36) of a dogfish lying perfectly still on the seabed, using expensive equipment and the best-quality film you can find, and you wouldn't believe how much "stuff" finds its way into your picture.

This stuff makes its presence felt only when lit up by a strobe, and by then it's too late.

DIGITAL CAMERAS have made underwater imagery far more accessible and far easier to obtain, but listen to one who learnt the hard way, and think about what your strobe is about to illuminate before taking that picture.

The point-and-shoot brigade who come up after a dive and immediately download a SIM card full of images and movies intrigue me. As a dinosaur of underwater photography, take it from me – quantity is no substitute for quality.

Head down, continually gazing at a screen restricts a diver's ability to enjoy the wider picture of whatever might be ahead, above or below.

Nowadays I often dive with a digital camera clipped to my BC, but I would still argue that being limited to 36 photo opportunities per dive was in itself a form of quality control.

It also had the effect of slowing down dives. Never once did I have to speed up because of a buddy's impatience. Quite the contrary – most were grateful and told me that they enjoyed the slower pace.

While I swapped lenses, adjusted strobes, set apertures and generally got marked due to the additional stress-loading, my buddies would happily examine at closer quarters the sea-life and scenery they might previously have finned straight past.

Today's cameras provide the opportunity to take a multitude of images in the blink of an eye, but they don't guarantee quality. Rather than selecting "continuous" image settings, why not consider limiting yourself to 36 or even fewer shots before entering the water? Stick to the limit, and I can almost guarantee that the composition and quality of your images will improve.

Who am I to be spouting this guff? Just a diver who took up underwater photography on the cusp of two vastly different technologies.

There's no question that the digital world has made life a whole lot easier, not least through its massive influence on the world of underwater imaging. But as with life on land, it's worth wondering whether the consequential increase in pace has taken something away.



awaiting a midweek opportunity to recreate the fun through each other's photographs.

I had already mentally promoted myself to "he who had the best pictures". My pictures of crabs, dogfish and wrecks would be clear, colourful, well-lit and well-composed. I had yet to come across the phrase "all the gear, but no idea".

I didn't expect all those dogfish images to be prize-winners, but I had thought one or two might be good enough to show friends and family how clever I was. Publication in a dive magazine could only be a matter of time.

Now if you're thinking of taking up underwater photography, do read up on the problems of backscatter when using a strobe.

In the days of film, such advice could have saved

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